

THE LONDON READER

of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

No. 1294.—VOL. XLVII.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING OCTOBER 16, 1886.

[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



[“WELCOME A THOUSAND TIMES TO YOUR ENGLISH HOME, MY SWEET CHILD!”]

DIANA'S DIAMONDS.

CHAPTER VII.

In two days' time they left us, and in the two intervening days I saw little of Captain Halford. His ankle was badly swelled, he could not bear a boot on; and Jack Hare monopolised me altogether, rode with me, rowed with me, walked with me, talked with me; in fact, it struck me more than once that his friend had voluntarily retired into the background.

He did not now challenge me to chess, he did not occupy a seat next mine, he did not seek any *tête à-tête* in the verandah as before—he was changed, he was cool; he devoted his conversation chiefly to papa.

What had I done to displease him? I hinted my fears quite timidly to Jack. One evening we rowed across the river, mounted the bank, and looked back on the bungalow.

The two elders paced the garden together, but we could see Captain Halford seated alone and alone.

“What is the matter with him? What makes him so strange the last few days?” I asked.

“A guilty conscience, most probably. No, you need not look so startled, he has not committed murder; but he is about to commit matrimony, and he feels that he must be prudent, and not flirt or carry on as he used to do.”

“Going to commit matrimony means engaged to be married?” I said, speaking after a long silence, and trying to command my voice with but poor success—it shook audibly. Never—never in all my life, had I felt a mental pang till now—and now Jack Hare had dealt me a blow that seemed to cleave my very heart.

I felt as if I should have liked to have cast myself down upon the ground, and then and there given way to a passion that seemed to choke me, that frightened me by its force. Was it anger, jealousy, love, shame, sorrow? Was it one or all of these emotions that seemed to be tearing my bosom to pieces?

“Yes, I believe so,” he replied.

“Is—is she pretty?” I faltered.

“No. Good style, dresses beautifully, plays the piano A 1, and dances better than anyone in Gurrampore.”

The exact contrast to me I could see.

“Is she fond of him?” I asked.

“Oh! I suppose so. I—never asked her,” and he groaned. “It's not regularly given out yet.”

“Then why do you tell me?” I exclaimed, angrily.

“Oh! I thought you ought to know—for fear—in case——” and he blundered and broke down. “And I don't mind telling you anything; in fact I've something very important to say to you on my own hook this last evening. That's why I brought you over here, where we can be quite alone and out of humanity's reach. I've something to say to you, Rancee.”

“Then say it, for goodness sake, and let us get back,” I said, impatient to return, to rush away from every mortal eye and hide myself somehow, till I recovered from the cruel shock I had just received.

“Ever since the first day I saw you I've been awfully spocny on you. Now, don't! Let me speak. Halford ha't it all his own

way at first, as usual. I saw I had no chance of cutting in, so I thought I'd just wait till he cooled off, as he was sure to do. I admire you more than anybody I ever saw in my life. I'm frightfully in love with you, though you might not think it, and quite off my sleep and food. My uncle is rich. He has taken a tremendous fancy to you, and I'm sure he would come down handsomely. Say, you will have me, Rance? We will ask your father's consent. I'll get some more leave and come back for the antelope shooting, and we will go down and get spliced in Bombay, and we will be awfully jolly together you will see. Eh! what do you say?"

He concluded, and he had not been the least bit shy or agitated as he laid his plans before me, no more than if we were making up a picnic party.

"Well. What do you say?"

"I say no," I answered at once.

"Oh, I say! Come now, you don't mean it! Think—think of getting away from *that*!" pointing to the bungalow, "and having no end of fun, and dances, and pretty dresses, and seeing the world and turning people's heads! Goodness knows if you will ever get such a chance again; and I assure you, you and your diamond necklace would take any place by storm!"

"Would we? All the same, I am not going to try the experiment; I mean to stay here."

"You must be mad! Honestly, you will be sorry for it yet. Take time to think; take a month, and then just drop me a line, and I'll come back like a shot! You see if I won't!"

"I could not marry you, Mr. Hare, not if I was near to see the sun's light again, much less the world! So be satisfied with your answer now, and let us always be good friends!"

"Satisfied? Humph! I wonder what your answer would have been if Hugh Halford had asked you the same question?" he exclaimed, in, evidently, a great passion.

"We have had enough of this; let us go back."

"Supposing I won't let you stir till you say yes?"

"I don't suppose you would like to forfeit the name of gentleman; and, anyway, you dare not keep me!"

"No, no, you are right. I was only joking! Come along, then; I'm awfully sorry, you are so determined! Do—do think of it—think of it after we have gone away. Absence may make the heart grow fonder."

To this suggestion I shook my head, then I rushed down the bank, calling over my shoulder—

"If you don't come now I shall go off and leave you, and you will have to wade the ford!" and he followed me sulkily into the boat.

I wonder if Captain Halford guessed at the scene that had taken place in the grove across the river. His keen eyes rested on me critically as I sprang up the steps, and hurried past him. I fancy the face of my companion and follower plainly told the whole tale.

I did not appear again that night. I could not if I would, because I had been crying. At daybreak the next morning I was alert and about; our visitors were getting ready for departure, their tents were struck, their country carts being loaded. What a blank space there would be when the tents and carts were gone!

We partook of an early breakfast of hot coffee, toast and eggs; packed a basket of provisions for the travellers, and aped them by accompanying them as far as the old palace on their homeward route.

Jack Hare, who was still sulky, rode in advance with father, and I was escorted on either hand by Mr. Hinkson and Captain Halford. Neither of them would yield my society to the other, and how earnestly I wished that Mr. Hinkson would ride on, would fall back, would even fall off, and thus leave us alone for even two minutes. I wanted so desperately to say a few words to Captain Halford, to justify

my seeming preference, to show him that I had heard of his engagement, that I was *delighted* at the news; in fact, I wanted to act the part of a hypocrite for the first time in my life, was passionately anxious to show him that I did not care a straw about him, nor if I ever set eyes on him again, but I never got this chance. Mr. Hinkson's fund of conversation never ceased until we were under the shade of the old garden walls, and here we were to part. It was not a long operation. Jack Hare rode up, and shook hands with an off-hand, careless, braggart air. Mr. Hinkson wrung my fingers most unmercifully, and said,—

"Your father has something to tell you from me, and I shall be very anxious till I hear what you say to it."

Captain Halford purposely lingered to the last. I knew it, I felt it. He came alongside of my horse, his eyes looked many sad farewells, his lips said,—

"Good-bye, Miss Manners; I shall never forget this happy week. If ever you want a friend, remember you have one in Hugh Halford."

I tried to speak; I knew I was as white as a sheet, but I could not articulate one syllable. Father, Mr. Hinkson, and Mr. Hare were not looking; they were taking leave of one another with great volubility.

"Give me one of your gloves," he added, eagerly. "Here is one in the saddle pocket. May I?" appropriating it as he spoke. "We shall meet again some day I assure; I feel sure of it."

Now taking my hand, he added in a whisper, "For Heaven's sake, don't forget me, Rance!"

Still I would not answer. Horror, shame, misery, I was crying—yes, crying! I was too utterly wretched for words, too young and foolish to be able to conceal my tears. With a wrench I dragged my hand away, wheeled my horse suddenly round, and galloped off home; when—where I arrived long before father—I dismounted, tore off my habit, and casting myself down on the bed, wove the bitterest tears I had ever shed.

Towards evening I ventured into the verandah and found father and Peggy in full converse, and loud in praise of our late guests. As I suddenly appeared, Peggy made a significant sign not least on me, and withdrew into the dining-room.

"Well, Rance, my child, you look wretched!" he said, gazing at me in amazement. "I suppose you miss our pleasant friends. By the way, I have a very important message for you from one of them. Who do you think it is from?"

"Mr. Hinkson," I rejoined, in a melancholy voice.

"Yes. Can you guess it?"

"I? Oh, no! I have not the faintest idea what he wants."

"He has asked permission to return alone, and to pay his addresses to you. He wishes to marry you."

At that announcement I burst into loud hysterical laughter that lasted quite three minutes; peal after peal horrified my parent.

"He must be crazy or joking!" I cried at length. "Why, he is older than you, father!"

"Somewhere about my age."

"And what is that?"

"Nearly fifty."

"And I am not eighteen! Fifty from eighteen, I mean eighteen from fifty. Why—doing a sum on the table with my finger—he is thirty-two years older than I am, at the very least! He must be making fun!"

"Marriages where there is a disparity on that side are often most happy," said father, gravely.

"But surely you don't want me to go away from you, and marry another old gentleman?"

"No! I would keep you always with me, but I have been thinking lately. Supposing anything happened to me—you have no friends in this country—what would become of you? I have been thinking that I am wrong in keeping you shut up here, with all your wealth and beauty!"

"I know I am beautiful, but I never knew I was rich before!" I returned, quite coolly.

"Yes, I am wealthy, and you are my heiress; but pray, who told you that you were beautiful?" he demanded, rather sternly.

"Captain Halford, but then I pressed him to tell me."

"Indeed!" gazing at me thoughtfully. "I am not sure, after all, that it is a good plan to bring a girl up in utter ignorance of all the laws of polite society, and in such conventual seclusion. If you had been educated as other young women, you would never have pressed a young man to tell you his opinion of your appearance. Well! but to return to Mr. Hinkson. He is active for his age, well-informed, sensible, and rich, and has long been looking for a wife!"

"He won't find one here then, father; and why did he not ask me himself? Was he afraid?"

"Those other two fellows never gave him a chance, and he preferred to sound me first. I was to obtain your answer, and write."

"In fact, you were to negotiate the whole business? Well! I prefer being asked at first hand."

"It would be a great comfort to me, Rance, if I knew you were the wife of a good man before I was taken."

"How do you know he is a good man, father? He struck me as mean and selfish, and it would be very bitter sorrow to me, if you were taken, to find I had married a fool to but old chattering, meddling Mr. Hinkson!"

"Oh, Rance! Well! I hope you have not lost your heart to either of the two young men. Hare is as crackbrained as I can be, and Hinkson says that Halford, though a capital fellow among men, is a despicable flirt and an unscrupulous fortune hunter, while I was exceedingly sorry to hear, as I had him."

"Then they have been saying nice things of each other all round?" I cried. "For Captain Halford told me that Mr. Hinkson had completely spoiled their shooting trip, that he came uninvited, that his manners and address were extremely trying, to say the best of it, and that he was an egotistical bore!"

"Oh! very nice, very nice, indeed, and just like the world!" said father.

"And so he was. His I—I—I—my—my—used to drive me mad," I continued. "I could not bear him."

"She won't have him," said Peggy, reappearing in the nearest doorway. "I know it. How could the old fool expect a young girl to look at the likes of him, and two smart gentlemen alongside of him! Captain Halford is as handsome a man as you'll see in the length and breadth of the country, and a real gentleman."

"Captain Halford is engaged to be married," I said very stoutly, and looking straight before me as I spoke.

"Do you tell me that now! Well, well, well. And the other—the young fellow with the biggest appetite I ever saw?"

"The other proposed for me on his knees in the grove across the river."

"And—?" put in father, very sharply.

"And I refused him, of course," I said, proudly.

"There's for you now," said Peggy, looking at us both excitedly. "I was sure Miss Rance would not be for taking the first that came her way, or the first that ever spoke to her. She knows she can pick and choose, and please herself."

"Oh yes, of course I can pick and choose," I retorted, scornfully; "I see such numbers of people."

"Well, now you have seen something of the world, had singing, and riding, and talking, with outriders, and two offers of marriage, tell us what you think of it, honey?"

To this I made no reply, but stood up as if about to move away, and as if I was tired of the subject.

"Stay a moment, Rance, and answer

Peggy's question. I also would like to have your opinion of the little scrap of the outer world that has drifted our way in such a strange fashion."

"If that is a pattern of the world at large I am glad I live out of it—that's all I can say."

"What!" they cried, in one breath. "Yes, glad and thankful. From what I have seen of the world I hate it!" with which startling announcement I turned my back on both, snatched up my hat, and fled down to the river.

I unmoored the boat and let it float away, as I sat in the stern, secure from all molestation. Only a week! and in that week how much had happened! A week had entirely changed me—had thoroughly opened my eyes, and taught me many things.

I now knew that I was rich and beautiful; but I also knew the pangs of unrequited love—love that I had given unconsciously, and given unsought. For I felt such an agony of regret at the news of Captain Halford's engagement, and such a dead blank in my existence since his departure, that I was sure this must be love. And he was gone, gone only fifteen hours ago, and yet it seemed already months since he had begged my glove that very morning, had pressed my willing hand, and gazed into my tear-laden eyes. Where had been my pride—what would he think of me? I scarcely cared—I was so desperately wretched. Never, never had I dreamt in my wildest moments that a human being was capable of feeling such grief and misery as was then my lot.

As I lay in the stern of the boat, drifting I cared not whether, I fell asleep—indeed, I cried myself to sleep, oblivious of dinner hour, and awoke with a shock, to find I had run upon a sand bank fully four miles down the stream.

This roused me both mentally and physically. I remembered that father and Peggy would be looking and calling for me, and doubtless very uneasy at my long absence. So I seized the oars and rowed home, which I reached about ten o'clock, and was received with great joy, and a good scolding.

There was no use, I assured myself, in fretting, but I secretly pined and fretted every day. I became thin, silent, and spiritless, which was all the result of the fulfilment of my wish "to see the world."

CHAPTER VIII.

ARRAS this we had the rains—such rains as are totally unknown in Europe—rains long pinned for by the thirsty soil, that has not known a drop of moisture for months. Firstly, clouds come banking up for weeks, the air is heavy, the heat unsupportable; then rolls of distant thunder come nearer and nearer; finally, with one flash, one crash, the heavens seem to open, and the long-desired rain descends in torrents—such torrents as though they meant to beat our bungalow into the ground, or wash it into the now raging, boiling, rapidly-rising river!

For days the thunder pealed. We—at least, Peggy and I—remained indoors, or sat in the verandah; she sewing, I, poor little goose, diligently reading every book we possessed that had ever been honoured by Hugh Halford's mention.

The violence of the weather did not keep my father or Tony long indoors; in fact, after the first burst of the monsoon they actually went away for a three days' shooting trip.

Just after their return a somewhat tragic occurrence took place, which gave Peggy and I a great fright. I noticed that she was especially particular in shutting up and locking the many doors and windows, and asked her the reason of such unusual precautions.

"The reason is," she answered, "that the last two nights I've noticed a strange man lurking about after dusk that has no call to be here, and I don't like the look of him

at all. It's my opinion he got sight of your necklace. You wore it one night and sat out there in the moonlight, and the shining of it could be seen a long way off. I don't like having such valuables in the house, and the master and Tony away. We have no watch-dog, and the native servants are no good."

"There's the panther," I suggested.

"And he is no more use than a big foolish cat," was her imperious answer, and late that night, and much to her relief, the travellers returned, wet, hungry, and empty-handed.

Their return was possibly unknown to the man who had been long hanging round the premises, who, unfortunately for himself, made the attempt just a day too late.

I woke up (being a very light sleeper) by some noise in my room, a kind of stealthy tread on the matting, and a sound of heavy suppressed breathing, and I sat up in bed and called out, "Who's there?" at the top of my voice.

In a second two hands gripped my throat. Speech was impossible, struggling useless, and as to respiration I was suffocating. Those fingers were like iron pressing into my windpipe. I believe in another minute I would have been strangled, when somebody burst into the room—someone who must have heard my sharp challenge of "Who's there?"

It was father. In a moment I was released, that awful grip was removed, and I breathed once more. Then there was a kind of rush in the darkness, and the robber was gone—had escaped through the door into the verandah, which stood wide open to the right, through which we could distinctly hear his flying footsteps amidst the torrents of heavy, monotonous rain.

Lamps were brought, and an examination ensued. Peggy and I looked anxiously to see what had been stolen, whilst father and Tony ran down to the river's edge, to try and trace our recent visitor.

My room was undisturbed, but my watch, a little gold brooch, and my bangles had been collected into a heap, evidently to be readily carried off. A rude iron chisel which had opened the outer door lay on the floor. Nothing else gave evidence of the robbery—no, not at first sight; but when we came to look more carefully we saw that the lid of the sandal-wood box had been prized open, and the diamond necklace was gone—yes, gone!

"I knew it! Such blazing jewels is dangerous in a house as gunpowder!" cried Peggy. "It's a terrible loss, but I never fancied it, and I can't say I'm sorry that it has gone, and without any bloodshed or murder—that's one comfort."

"What nonsense you are talking, Peggy," I exclaimed, in great excitement. "It was worth thousands of pounds—it was matchless!"

It must be found, and the man must be traced.

"A queer chance ye have of ever seeing either of them again. He is a couple of miles off by this time."

In this prophecy Peggy was wrong; for the next day the body of a man was found a mile down the river. He had evidently tried to swim and been drowned in the attempt, and clasped round his neck—presumably for security—was found my wonderful diamond necklace!

Somehow, after this occurrence, I began to share Peggy's superstition, and I believe that the Evil Eye had some meaning, and that there were good grounds for its having a bad name. I hinted my fears to father, who laughed them to scorn, and teased me on the subject for a whole afternoon—so much so, that I became really quite ashamed of myself.

"I have had it for years before you ever saw it, and it never did any harm," he said.

"Perhaps it cannot when it's locked up! Have you never had any bad luck since you got it?"

"No. Let me see—I have had it nearly

seventeen years. I had one great misfortune just at the time I got it."

"And there it is, you see!" I cried, triumphantly.

"No, no; that had no connection with the necklace, and I have had peace for many years. Seriously, Rance, do not get these foolish ideas into your head. It's all very well for Peggy, who is an ignorant old woman, but no really cultivated person who has read and thought—and you have done these in some modest degree—is ever superstitious. It is a sure sign of a weak and narrow mind."

I knew all this, and I was ashamed of my folly. Yet, when I looked at a certain mound on the river bank—the robber's grave—I was filled with a curious sense of remorse.

If I had not worn the necklace on that never-to-be-forgotten night in the moonlight, this wretched thief would never have seen it, never have been tempted, never have carried it off, never have been drowned, and lying under that solitary little mound at the end of our enclosure!

A much more painful tragedy soon swept all thoughts of grave and thief and diamonds out of my distracted head.

The rains in India are the season for an abundant supply of snakes—some of them, such as the cobra and kareit—being deadly, and their bite almost instantaneously fatal. Dozens of harmless ones had been killed about our premises, and but a few of the bad species, for one's native servants are naturally always on the *qui vive*. One afternoon as I sat reading in the verandah Peggy came out with an ashen face, her whole face shaking with wild, dry, convulsive sobs. At first she was speechless.

"What—what has happened?" I cried, starting up in great alarm.

"The worst that could—the worst that could. There is no time to break it to you quietly; minutes are gold. The master has just come in; he has been bitten by a cobra, and he gives himself two hours to live, no more. In two hours he will be a dead man!"

I did not listen to the whole of this. Ere she had done speaking I was with father in his study; he and Tony were there alone. He was sitting at a table with his left hand tied up, and looked very grave, but he did not seem to be in any pain, or look any way different from his usual appearance.

"She has told you I see, my poor child. You must be brave and bear it," were his first words.

"I can't," I cried, bursting into a passion of tears, and throwing myself down beside him. "It will kill me, if what she says is true."

"Too true. I was bitten in the hand about a quarter of an hour ago; the cobra was on a branch that I pushed aside in the jungle. We galloped home, for I knew that moments were precious. Be brave, Rance, and make the very most of the last hour we shall be together. Get up—get up—and let me see you show some fortitude; to see you like this makes it a hundred times worse for me, and I am sure you would not wish to do that. I have so much to say to you, and such a short time to say it in. If you will grieve afterwards, and not for me, but yourself. Only for leaving you thus I am glad my release has come."

"Now, Peggy, I am surprised at you! Be reasonable. I have already given many directions to Tony. You and he are to take Miss Rance to England, and leave her in the charge of her uncle, my brother Isaac. Here," pulling out a drawer, "is a letter with full instructions. Here also is my will; my solicitors are Ball and Co., in Bombay. They will manage all my affairs, and you had better send off a note to-night by special messenger to Colar Post-office, and telegraph my death—and bury me to-morrow morning under the palm-tree."

Tony could only nod his head in reply, and gulp away his tears.

"You and Peggy have been excellent friends to me this last lonely part part of my life. You will find that I have not forgotten this, and that you need never again take service. If you will leave me now with Miss Rancee I will call you presently."

"Rancee," when they had silently quitted the room, "we little know what a day may bring forth. I should have wished to have had more time to tell you many things. Your uncle is a widower, with two sons seldom at home. You will, I am sure, have a second father in him; he will be your guardian till you are one-and-twenty."

"I have no other relations except distant cousins. You will be well off owing to my savings here and my earnings elsewhere. You have forty thousand pounds, besides what the sale of the horses here will fetch; also my rifles, books, and guns, but the house is not to be sold for fifty years. Let it remain as it is with two caretakers; you may be as glad of its shelter some day as I was. A young girl like you going forth into the world will meet with many strange sights, have not a few trials, and temptations. Be upright and truthful, be a good woman; and should you ever marry be a good wife. Trifle with no man's feelings, and give your hand where you give your heart. Above all, never deceive him."

As he said this he took my hand in his, and pressed it earnestly; his face was clay colour, beads of perspiration stood upon his brow.

"You grow more like her every hour—every hour," he muttered. "I could imagine that she had come back as I look at you, Rancee."

"My mother! Oh, father! before you leave me," I burst out, "before you leave me for ever, if such an awful blow must fall upon me, tell me, if it is even one word, tell me something about her—my mother, whom I never saw."

"Tell you what?"

His face now looked grey and drawn.

"When did she die? Where did she die? Why do you never speak of her. Was she not young, and beautiful, and good?"

"She was."

Here he stopped and closed his eyes, a kind of violent shudder passed over him.

"It is coming on, the drowsiness that there is no withstanding. I can fight against it no longer."

After a pause, he motioned to me to approach him and kiss him. I remember well the agony of that last, long kiss. I remember no more, for I fainted, and when I recovered consciousness it was all over. Yes, he had been dead an hour; he died at sundown.

He just became weaker and weaker, and fainter and fainter, and then ceased to breathe—a seemingly as if he had slept out of life. The next morning he was buried. Tony and some of our native servants (who were Christians) dug the grave, and laid him in it beneath the palm-tree, and Tony read the burial service, which was almost inaudible from our sobs.

At first, when I went back and sat down in the empty verandah, I felt that I had only just awoke from a bad dream; and, indeed, for many days the blow was so stunning that I could not realise it. I kept thinking that father was away on one of his shooting trips—he might be back any day—but there stood his black Arab in the stall; there lay his guns and his fishing tackle. It was all true, it was no dream; in one short hour he had been out off. I was alone in the world and an orphan, and there surely were few orphans as utterly unprepared to do battle with life.

An agent from Ball's arrived shortly in a very irritable condition, after eighty miles in a bullock-cart on a bad road. However, the sight of the house and of an excellent dinner revived his spirits. He soon set things in order, took charge of father's papers, despatched the horses for sale to Bombay, and made us pack up our belongings, dismiss the servants, and depart.

Oh! with what sorrow and reluctance did I

finally take leave of my only home! I paid farewell visits to the old palace, the hill above the village, and all my favourite haunts. I spent many hours and many tears beside the grave under a palm-tree, and at last I found myself en route to England, in company with Tony and Peggy.

Of course everything was new to me—the train, the carriages in Bombay, the fine public buildings, the ships, the people, the sea, and the shipping. Somehow I did not care a pin about it now; all pleasure was absent from my sunken eyes, dim with crying. How different it would all have seemed had he been with me! Our passages were taken in the P. & O. steamship *Rome*, as "Miss Manners and two servants," and very dowdy Miss Manners and her maid looked among the crowds of fashionable passengers.

I wore a ready-made black gown—a bad fit, a black hat, and heavy crepe veil. I was not in much request among my fellow-travellers. I believe they thought me eccentric and unsociable—they were all in such spirits going home. It never seemed to occur to them that I could be in deep grief; besides this, I was, during the first part of the voyage, miserably ill, and lay in my berth for days and days. Among the thoughts that came to me during those empty leaden hours was one—a constant visitor. What had my father been going to reveal about my mother when death set a seal on his lips? "She was—" he had said, and then his breath failed him.

She was what?

CHAPTER IX.

By the time we reached Port Said I had got over the worst of the *mal de mer*, and was able to stay on deck as well as other people.

At Malta we took in some more passengers, including, to my great amazement, Mr. Hinkson. He was literally petrified when he beheld me, and heard the reason of my journey.

I was really surprised to find that I was quite glad to see him. In my utterly forlorn condition I clung to him as an old friend. He was one of the very few people who had seen my strange Indian home, and had known father. For these reasons—no others—I felt tenderly towards him, permitted him to sit by me, always at meals, and almost all the day on deck.

Of course I had inquired after his two companions, his nephew first as in politeness due. "How," I asked, "was Mr. Hare?"

"As great a young scamp for spending money as ever stepped; and as he has not a penny besides his pay, he says nothing will save him but a rich wife, and they are scarce in India."

"Indeed! And Captain Halford, is he married?"

"No, nor likely to be. What put that into your head?"

"Why is he not married? He is engaged, Mr. Hare told me so."

"Told you so? Are you sure?"

"Perfectly certain."

"Then if he told you that he was just joking. Halford can't afford to marry, I've heard him say so myself. He will live and die a bachelor, though there was a girl with a tidy little sum of money that was very far gone on him at Gurrumpore. She'd have given her ears to marry Hugh Halford, and anyone could see it with half an eye, himself included. I must say the way she ran after him was most barefaced!"

"Still he might be engaged for anything you might know, Mr. Hinkson?"

"Well, he might! Ahem! I only wish I was engaged myself. You were very cruel to me, Miss Rancee," suddenly dropping into a tender and reproachful tone, to my great horror and dismay. "See, let me plead my own cause—and it is much stronger than it was before. Don't you think so?"

"No, I do not see that," I answered frankly.

"Yes you do. I had your father's consent, I was his friend. The match would have had his warm approval. Would you not like to carry out his wishes? You are alone. You have no protector."

"I have my uncle," I answered shortly.

"Yes, but he is a stranger. Now I am not. No one else whom you may meet can have the same claim as I have—that of having known you in your Indian home. No one but Jack and Halford, and they are out of the question—two paupers! Now I," placing his hand on his chest and looking at me in a languishing manner, "am very fond of you. I am in the prime of life; I am rich, I shall give you your own way in everything. You shall have a house in town, a nice villa at Worwood, a horse or horses and brongham. I declare I'd have a box at the opera if it was to do nothing else but show off your diamonds. What do you say?"

"I say the same as before, and that is No." I returned, by no means tempted by this alluring sketch. "And please never mention the subject to me again—or—or—we shall cease to be friends, and I shall be jolly, for I have so few that I cannot afford to lose one."

"Well, I'll be silent now, but I'll not despair. I know a man who asked a girl seven times before she would say yes! You may change your mind; women are proverbially fickle. At any rate, I'll give you my card, and address, and a wire, or a line, will bring me at any time."

"Mr. Hinkson, if you persist in talking in this way I shall be obliged to leave you," I said, impatiently. "If you ever recur to the subject again it will be the signal for a quarrel between us."

My air of angry resolution evidently cowed him, for he was silent on that subject till we landed at Southampton, where I was met by my uncle, a little cheerful old gentleman much older than father, with white hair and blue spectacles.

"I'm delighted to see you, niece," shaking both my hands. "Nothing short of your arrival would have routed me out of my den. I'm a bookworm, and don't leave home once in ten years. But poor John's daughter! Ah! very sad, very sad. Don't cry. You're not like the Manners—no, not a bit."

He talked very rapidly, in short broken sentences, whilst Peggy and Tony bustled about and got our not very large supply of luggage together, and at last we got into a cab, and drove off to the railway station.

Just ere our train started Mr. Hinkson came running up breathlessly, seized my hand, shook it vigorously, and left a card in my reluctant clasp.

"Good-bye," he gasped. "There is my address, and don't forget what I told you. And—"

At this moment the train began to move, and whatever else he was going to say he said to the empty air.

"Who is that?" asked my uncle. "A madman or a tout, or what?"

"He is a gentleman I knew in India, and a fellow-passenger. Perhaps I should tell you that he has asked me to marry him!"

"Upon my honour! And what have you said?"

"No—ten thousand times no!"

"So I should hope. Tell me honestly, Diana, now we are by ourselves, and we won't get such another opportunity, and whilst I think of it—have you a lover?—for, of course, I ought to know."

"No, uncle."

"Sure and certain?" he repeated, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Sure and certain, and honour bright."

"Nell, you are a very pretty girl!"

"Yes, I know that."

"Oh, indeed! And who told you?"

"Father; he said I was rich and pretty."

"I am not so sure about the money."

"But you may be. I have forty thousand pounds, without the slightest doubt—Ball told me so."

"You seem to know all about it, my dear. However, you can't touch a penny of it till you are of age. You will live quietly with your old bookworm of an uncle. You will be company for Carrie."

"Who is Carrie?"

"She is the widow of my eldest son, and she lives with me. She is a most intellectual, charming, good creature, and you will love her."

"I thought you lived alone, Uncle Isaac."

"So I did; but not now."

After this, uncle asked hosts of questions about father—his mode of life, and mine. He made himself master of every particular, down to the names and wages of our native servants, the prices realized by the horses in Bombay, the amount of money our travelling expenses had cost, and the length of time we had had Peggy.

There was nothing left for him to discover; and I made one discovery in return. It was this—that I did not like uncle nearly so well without his blue spectacles; his eyes quite spoiled the nice genial expression of his face.

They were the smallest and lightest of blue eyes—eyes that looked almost white, and as if they had never smiled and never been shut—they were so hard, so keen, and so crafty.

Three hours' steady railway travelling brought us to the nearest railway station to "Rivals' Green," my uncle's place, and the old family residence of the Mannors.

A wagonette that had seen its best days, drawn by a pair of ill-matched horses, awaited us, and into this we stepped, Uncle, Peggy and I, whilst Tony ascended to the seat beside the driver.

The road we took was winding and very pretty. Deeper and deeper we seemed to go into the very heart of the country, among green lanes, past oaks, and beeches, and trees, all strange to me; but everything was strange to me. The mere fact of driving, the cottages, fields, carts, the occasional mansions that we rattled past, were all a source of novelty to me.

After fully an hour's drive, the latter part of which was wilder and lonelier, and more wooded than ever, we turned into a gateway and wound up an avenue, and came to a standstill in front of a very large, old, ugly, country house.

There was nothing pretty or imposing about it—even its age did not recommend it. It had five narrow windows on either side of the hall-door, ten above them, and ten more almost squeezed up into the roof. Two flights of steps met in a kind of arch before the entrance; they were very high, and the basement story and another door was on a level with the gravel sweep.

This door, which looked out under the arch, had in old, old days, I afterwards heard, been the real entrance, which had now ascended a story higher.

The whole house was of a pale yellow colour, and had a serious, gloomy look; the lawn, or demesne, in which it stood, was ornamented with splendid trees, especially copper beech and horse-chestnut. The latter were in full flower.

Inside the house was a narrow hall; on the right hand side an ante-chamber; and beyond that a large, square, handsome drawing-room.

I was met at the door of this apartment by a tall, dark lady, with black hair and eyes, a high colour in her cheeks, and a handsome, bold profile.

She was dressed in black, and wore a white thing on her head, which I afterwards discovered was a widow's cap.

She looked at me very hard; indeed, her first glance had something so searching in it that I felt quite uncomfortable, and then she put her arms round my neck and drew me towards her, and kissed me several times most affectionately.

"Welcome a thousand times to your English home, my sweet child!"

Then she kissed me, and again turned to

Peggy, with whom she shook hands in the warmest manner.

"And this is your nurse and excellent, faithful, trusty servant! Such treasures are, indeed rare in these days. You must make yourself at home at Rivals' Green, Peggy."

To which invitation Peggy muttered some incoherent reply, and dropped a curtsy.

"Dinner will be ready immediately, so I shall take you up to your room," said the widow, now turning again to me. "I am sure you will be thankful to take your things off."

The house was large, and the stairs were shallow; innumerable were the passages and turns and sudden corners, and ascents or descents of two or three steps.

My room seemed to be miles away from the drawing-room. I felt certain I never would know my way back to those regions. It was large and low, and had three windows, and no less than four doors; one was a cupboard, the other two led into rooms on either side, and one led into the lobby.

The furniture was heavy and old-fashioned, and comprised an enormous four-post bed, a wardrobe, dressing-table, sofa, and chairs, all of the same date. Everything looked gloomy and ancient, but everything was delightfully clean.

A smell of dried lavender pervaded the atmosphere, and big bunches of wall-flowers and roses were set upon the mantel-piece and on the toilette table. It was an agreeable change after the cabin of a ship.

"Your boxes are already up," said Carrie, "and here is your hot water. I shall come back for you in a quarter of an hour."

"Thank you!" I returned, gratefully, feeling that otherwise I would never discover the dining-room. "Do you dress—I mean change your dress—for dinner, Mrs. Mannors?"

"Call me Carrie, my dear child. Dress—no. You can come down just as you please."

"Well, Peggy," I said, as the door closed, "what do you think of it all?"

"All what?" she echoed, crossly.

"England, and Rivals' Green?"

"As to England, shure I saw it before; and as to Rivals' Green—well, I'll tell you my opinion of that in a week or two."

"At least tell me what you think of uncle?"

"He is not a bit like the maaster, and he has a deal of gab! and is as bad for asking questions as if her wor a schoolmaster!"

"Then you don't like him?"

"Oh! I never said that. I may like him well, for all I know. Only just at first, honey, don't you be too free with any of them, and don't tell them all your mind, like a little child. That is my advice to you."

The dining-room at Rivals' Green was a long, low room, with windows at either end, and panelled with oak, which made it unusually dark; the very ceiling in it was oak, and it gave one the sensation of sitting in a large box with two glass ends.

In the dining-room I was presented to my cousin Joe, my uncle's son, who had only just arrived from London.

He was a tall, youngish man with a good figure, and of fair complexion; but his face had a red, blotchy look, his eyes were dull, and his hair very scanty. Nevertheless, a neat little moustache, with elaborately twisted ends, a broad, high forehead, and good teeth, somewhat redeemed his appearance; and his air was courtly, and his dress most careful, down to the most insignificant detail.

He had charming manners, led the whole conversation, and put me quite at my ease. He lightly touched on my recent loss—my voyage—and then he proceeded to entertain us all with the latest news from town. He told anecdotes capitally; was an inimitable mimic.

I had not laughed for three months, and I could not help laughing now. I was more amused, as I sat at uncle's table, *vis à-vis* to my cousin Joe, than I had ever been in my life.

I heard of things new to me till then, and

I listened not only with my ears, but, actually, so great was my astonishment, with my mouth open as well.

After dinner we repaired to the drawing-room—Carrie and I alone. As we sat over the fire I remembered Peggy's caution; and though I was obliged to answer some, I eluded many of my companion's questions—all put with an air of affectionate solicitude. Most of her questions, strange to say, ran on money, and on our style of living and expenditure.

"Your father I never saw," she said; "he went to India nearly thirty years ago, when I was quite a child, and never returned. He did not care much for his own people, nor keep up any correspondence with them after his father and mother died. You see he had no claim on anyone, he was a younger son; he got his profession, and there was an end of him. He did very well in India; he made a large fortune I have been given to understand."

"Yes; forty thousand pounds I suppose is a good deal of money."

"How did he amass so much in about fifteen years' practice?"

"The native princes are very liberal; they give immense fees, and I fancy father received many such."

"Really, you surprise me! In money?"

"Yes, generally in money, but sometimes in jewels."

"In jewels? Are you sure? It seems so funny. Surely you are mistaken?"

"Quite certain," rather proud to contradict her on the subject. "One native prince gave father a diamond—." Here I bethought me somewhat late of Peggy's caution, and hesitated, and then added, "a diamond necklace, worth at the least fifteen thousand pounds."

Here I discovered that uncle and cousin Joe had joined us. In the dusk I had not noticed their entrance by another door, and they had been most interested listeners.

"A diamond necklace worth fifteen thousand pounds. That was something like a fee! No wonder my Uncle John was a rich man," said Joe, rubbing his hands. He seemed to be in greater spirits than ever. "Well, I wish I was rich! I wish I was a bishop!" he exclaimed, sinking in a chair beside me, and crossing his legs.

"And what are you, cousin Joe?" I asked, with appalling bluntness.

"A poor devil with nothing to do, cousin Diana. I was called to the bar, and had chambers in the Temple and all that sort of thing, and then I read so hard my health gave way, and I've never been fit for much since. I can't stand work!"

"And how do you pass your time?"

"Oh, I don't do much. I write a little for the papers."

At this information he went up about a thousand cubits in my innocent mind. I looked on him as far above ordinary mortals; doubtless something of this was expressed in my face.

"And what do you write about?" I inquired, in an awestruck tone.

"Oh! about theatrical matters, and the turf," he answered, in an off-hand way. "Do you like music? Shall I sing you a ditty, cousin?" he added, rising and walking to the piano, and striking a few chords.

Of course I eagerly assented, and drawing up a chair he sat down, ran a practised hand over the piano, and commenced a song called "Some Day."

His voice was not strong, not more than sufficient to fill a small room, nor was it as sweet or as thrilling as another I had heard; but, all the same, it had a charm of its own, that there was no withstanding. It was a well-trained organ that had been made the most of, and Joe was evidently well accustomed to singing and to melting his audience. At the present moment I was melted—nay, more, I was dissolved in tears, especially when he sang a song dealing with death, every word of which seemed specially to apply to me.

During the singing Carrie sat in a low armchair doing some wonderful trick with her fingers—a ball of cotton and a bit of bone, which I afterwards learnt was called "Tatting," and uncle leant back in another armchair, and having thrown a red silk handkerchief over his bald head and spectacles, slept soundly.

I suppose I looked white—but then I was always white—and weary, for at ten o'clock I was ordered off to bed. Joe rose and got my candle, and as he bid me good-night squeezed my hands most sympathetically, and I returned the pressure. Yes, I did; I merely meant to assure him of my gratitude, of my appreciation of his delightful singing.

Carrie took me up to my room, which I discovered, to my great disgust, I was to occupy alone. I was in hopes that Peggy might have been allowed to share it, but no, Peggy was a quarter of a mile away by her own description, when she helped me to undress, and to examine and securely lock and bolt three out of those four unnecessary doors.

I slept very soundly that night, for I was tired, and I dreamt a great deal; though in the morning the only thing I could recall of all of them was that someone had said to me very distinctly, "Take care of your diamond necklace!" but within an hour or two both dream and warning were entirely forgotten. Perhaps it is just as well that we rarely remember our dreams!

(To be continued.)

HIS QUAKER BRIDE.

—:—

CHAPTER X.—(continued.)

"Little monsters!" snorted the Colonel, on making his escape from the family-party. "That such a charming woman could be so deceitful, Cavendish! I assure you that she never once mentioned those brats to me, and—and I might have married her but for this revelation. It is positively awful! I can never thank you enough for exposing her duplicity in time to save me from such a fate!"

Meanwhile "the charming woman" was in strong hysterics, consequent upon the cruel disappointment and mortification she had undergone.

"They are very nice children, Colonel!" said Algy, persuasively. "They would improve upon acquaintance, you know, and surely Mrs. Whycherley might reconcile you to her family?"

The Colonel glanced askance at his companion, half-inclined to resent his remark, but Algy's gravity prevented an explosion.

Algy was an agreeable companion, and the little dinner at the hotel was exquisitely served, yet somehow the Colonel failed to enjoy himself as he had contemplated doing.

He went straight to his club on their return to town; while Algy, with a consciousness of work well done, put in an appearance at a ball, going home at cock-crow in a jubilant, well-satisfied frame of mind.

Aurelia laughed till the tears stood in her bright eyes as Algy gravely related the Brighton incident to her the next morning.

"Nine children!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I can afford to pity poor Mrs. Whycherley now. I shall never hate her again. What a dreadful exposure! I knew that something very serious had happened; papa came home in such a meek, crestfallen mood. He did not say anything to me, but I drew my own conclusions. I cannot thank you sufficiently for what you have done, Mr. Cavendish. But for you he would have married that dreadful woman and all her children."

"If you are unable to thank me sufficiently I'll take what is in your power to offer, like a generous creditor," said Algy, boldly.

"What do you mean?" asked Aurelia, laughing and blushing.

"I mean that I am perfectly willing to take you," he continued; "that you are the only woman in the world, so far as I am concerned, Aurelia. I shall certainly never ask any other woman to marry me."

"It would be setting papa such a bad example," objected Aurelia, not very strenuously. "And—and I said I never would renounce my freedom in order to get married. I am wedded to the cause—the emancipation of woman."

"Well, if I promise to adopt the cause and do all in my power to promote its interests, you would not be breaking your word in becoming my wife, since I should then be part and parcel of it," urged Algy. "And, pardon me for saying so, but you are much too attractive and brilliant a woman to live and die an old maid, Aurelia."

"You ought to have been a Jesuit," she retorted. "I never heard such casuistry before."

"If it's all the same, I would rather not be a Jesuit, since they are not allowed to get married. Seriously, Aurelia, do you care just a little for me?"

"No."

"Then you're—"

"I care a great deal for you," she interrupted, in a gentler tone. "No one else would have succeeded in persuading me to prove false to my principles. If only papa—"

"He requires more than one person to take care of him, darling," said Algy, kissing her fondly. "You must let me share your task. Between us we shall be able to keep that gay Lothario, your father, in order."

When Colonel Fitz-Markham was requested to give his sanction to their engagement—which he did very readily—he came to the conclusion that things were never so bad but that they might have been worse.

If Mrs. Whycherley was for ever lost to him he had at least got rid of Aurelia, his clever managing daughter, under whose iron rule he had so often winced. Algy Cavendish would have to bear with her in the future.

After long waiting, Val Curzon was about to meet with his reward.

A note from Mr. Greymarsh reached him one morning, just as he was about to leave town in impatient despair.

"Come round to the office at once, and bring the lady with you," ran the note. "We are on the eve of a complete explanation. The individual advertised for is here. I need hardly tell you to waste no time."

Val dashed away to Verney-street, swept Marie Benquier—who was prepared for such a contingency—into a hansom after a few hurried words had passed between them, and then directed the man to drive to Greymarsh and Dibble's office.

The Frenchwoman's eyes glittered like stars with excitement. Val, pale and quiet, but equally excited, sat beside her, nervously tugging at his moustache.

Neither of them vouchsafed any remark during the short, rapid ride. It was a relief to arrive at the office, where they were at once shown into Mr. Greymarsh's private room.

CHAPTER XI.

As Val Curzon entered the room with Marie Benquier leaning on his arm, his attention was immediately arrested by the well-dressed man with whom Mr. Greymarsh was conversing.

The stranger might have been Val's double, they resembled each other so closely in height, bearing, and feature. A more searching scrutiny, however, revealed certain subtle distinctions, not apparent at first sight.

The stranger's face wore a *blasé*, dissipated, evil expression, from which Val's was free. There were crow's feet under his eyes, and a cynical smile seemed to play constantly upon his lips.

He evinced as much astonishment as Val when the latter confronted him, accompanied by Marie Benquier. He turned angrily to Mr. Greymarsh for an explanation.

"Who is that?" he demanded, pointing to Val, and glancing dubiously at Marie. "You have inveigled me here under a false pretence, sir, a statement that I should hear something to my advantage by responding to your confounded advertisement. You have set a trap for me!"

"Hardly that," responded the lawyer, dryly. "The 'something to your advantage' referred to meant the bringing of your wife, whom you lost sight of more than two years ago, under your notice again, a proceeding that cannot fail to afford you much pleasure. The lady is here, accompanied by her brother-in-law, Mr. John Valentine Curzon."

"Val, my brother!" ejaculated Marie's husband. "The likeness between us is sufficient to prove that. This is an odd meeting," he continued, holding out his hand to Val, who did not take it. "Methinks you are my glass, and not my brother." How on earth did you become acquainted with my wife? Marie, you must forgive me for having left you so abruptly, *ma belle*. I should not have done so had circumstances been more in my favour at the time."

But in spite of his jaunty manner he was evidently ill at ease. Val regarded him in silent scorn; his wife shook him off with a superb gesture of disdain as he attempted to embrace her.

"Do not touch me!" she cried, fiercely. "I wish that I had died before ever you came to ruin my life, to rob me of all love and faith! Forgive me," she continued earnestly, to Val, "for the pain and loss my mistake has entailed upon you. I will do my utmost to atone for it. I certainly shall not spare or screen him!"

"What do you mean?" asked her husband. "You haven't been claiming my brother as your own peculiar property in mistake, for me, have you, Marie?"

"Explain," said Marie, turning away. "I cannot—will not speak to him. He has cost me too much in suffering already!"

"I have not only been accused of the wife desertion for which you alone are responsible," said Val, sternly. "Your disgraceful and criminal doings in Paris have also been laid to my charge, through the similarity of name and feature existing between us. I have lost the confidence of valued friends—thanks to you—my engagement has been broken off, my plans upset. You can expect to receive no forbearance at my hands. I mean to vindicate my own good name at any cost. I intend you to clear me from all the aspersions to which your misconduct has given rise."

Val briefly explained the various annoyances and losses he had sustained, and the charges brought against him. His brother listened sullenly.

"I was not to know that they would make you the scapegoat for all my offences," he said, in self-defence. "I'm sorry that it should have been so—honestly sorry. Until this morning I was unaware that such a strong personal resemblance existed between us, and the folly of naming us both Valentine has doubtless helped to produce the mistake. Many a time I have been on the point of coming to England to see you, but something always happened to frustrate the intention. What gave you the impression that I was still living? The report reached home that I had been scalped by Mexican Indians."

"I remembered that it was only a report," said Val, coldly, "and that your reputation had never stood very high. Then I requested your wife to let me examine her certificate of marriage. It proved her to have married Frederick Valentine Curzon, not John Valentine Curzon. Then I felt certain that you were the author of all my troubles, and I determined to find you."

"And now that you have found me what do you want me to do?"

"You must clear me fully and completely in the eyes of my friends by acknowledging this lady as your wife, and admitting that you alone were involved in the various disreputable acts wrongly attributed to me."

"And if I refuse to do this?"

"I shall take public proceedings against you. I mean to establish my own character as a man of honour, irrespective of the result to you. Any demur on your part to accede to my request—a very reasonable one under the circumstances—will land you in prison on a charge of wife desertion."

"Really it is quite what you might expect from a brother!" said Frederick Curzon, with a cynical air. "If you can assure me that a confession made in private, in which I admit my own liability with regard to Marie, and those other little affairs connected with Paris in which I once figured, shall be kept strictly a secret from the outer world, I don't mind making it. But I must first have your word that my self-inculpation will lead to no unpleasant consequences, that after I have cleared you I shall be at liberty to quit England immediately."

"I can afford to avail myself of your evidence upon these terms," said Val, after a moment's thought. "You will be free to go where you like, so far as I am concerned, when once you have declared me innocent of any participation in your wrongdoings, when you have explained away the mistake that has arisen. Stay though, there is your wife to be considered. I shall insist upon your making adequate provision for her before you disappear again."

"I will accept nothing—nothing!" interposed Marie, proudly. "I would sooner starve than be dependent upon the man whose name I bear."

Frederick Curzon shrugged his shoulders. "My dear Marie," he replied coolly, "your resolution does you credit, and considering that my finances are at a very low ebb, that I am not in a position to support myself, much less a wife, you could hardly have decided better. I should not have left you but for the disagreeable fact that I had arrived at my last pound."

"Our uncle in New York has cast you off, then?" said Val, interrogatively. "He refuses to do any more for you?"

"Precisely. He sent me adrift previous to that Mexican expedition, when I narrowly escaped being scalped by the Indians. He is a narrow-minded man, averse to youthful follies. I shall never inherit the piles of shining dollars that he has scraped together in the course of twenty years."

"You appear to have gone to work to ruin all your prospects in life in the most business-like manner possible," observed Val, dryly, as he penned a note to Algy Cavendish. "I must request you to remain here until the friend to whom I am now writing arrives. Then you will have to accompany me to Penwyrr in Cornwall, after which I shall have no further need of your services. Mrs. Curzon will, I know, consent to go with us."

"Yes. I will go," said Marie, promptly. "I owe this to you, and a great deal besides. I have unconsciously wrought you so much harm, but it is not yet too late to undo it. To accomplish this I will consent for once to endure my husband's society. Immediately I leave Penwyrr, however, we shall become as strangers to each other for ever. I never wish to meet him again in this world."

Val's note to his friend ran as follows:—

"DEAR ALGY,—

"Oblige me by coming at once to Grey-march and Dibble's office, where I await you. I am—thank Heaven—in a position to explain everything. I think you will find that you owe me an apology.

"VAL."

In less than half-an-hour Algy Cavendish was at the office. It did not take long to place him in possession of all the facts that had

transpired, Frederick Curzon admitting his own liability and confessing to the dishonourable deeds that had been fathered upon Val, in a manner that was half sullen, half defiant.

Val got his apology from Algy, and a very genuine one it was.

The little man deeply regretted the moment when he had been induced to think Val guilty. He expressed his warm desire to accompany the others to Cornwall for the purpose of assuring Aunt Rachael, in person, of his renewed trust and confidence in her nephew's unblemished honour!

Val willingly consented.

It was a strange little party that went down to Cornwall the next day, Frederick Curzon having been kept well under his brother's eye in the meanwhile, lest he should attempt to escape.

A painful feeling of constraint oppressed each member of the party. The situation was not one calculated to set any of them at ease.

Marie scarcely uttered a word as she sat opposite to the husband whom she despised and disliked. Val was absorbed in thoughts of Ruth, while Frederick Curzon's meditations could hardly have been of a pleasant nature, considering that he was there under pressure, about to be branded as the black sheep of the family.

It was on a glorious autumn afternoon that they reached picturesque, sleepy little Penwyrr. Bathed in mellow, golden sunshine, it looked quaint, old-world, and peaceful as a poet's dream.

When the cab containing the odd quartet drew up in front of Aunt Rachael's pretty, rose-covered cottage, she was talking earnestly with Ephraim Barclay in the front parlour.

Ruth's sinking health was the theme of conversation. From the time of her return from London she had never rallied, never recovered her previous good spirits and gentle energy. She seemed to be slipping away from them by imperceptible degrees, growing weaker and more ethereal every day.

Val's supposed infidelity had broken her heart. She never mentioned his name, but Aunt Rachael knew only too well the cause of the girl's fading away.

Ruth's condition filled her with alarm, in which Ephraim Barclay, who was constantly at the cottage, fully shared. They were discussing the propriety of taking Ruth away for a change when the cab drew up.

"Who can it be?" said Aunt Rachael, wondering. "I expect no visitors. What insufferable effrontery!" she continued, indignantly, as Val Curzon jumped lightly out. "I will not—"

But the words died upon her lips as another man, the exact counterpart of Val, emerged from the stuffy little cab, followed by Algy Cavendish, who turned to assist Mrs. Curzon in making her exit from it.

"Ephraim, something of importance has happened," said Aunt Rachael, in an agitated tone. "Both my nephews are here—Mr. Cavendish too, and Marie Benquier! What can it mean?"

"I don't know," responded Ephraim, shortly. He could very well have dispensed with the entire party.

In a few seconds the bewildered little maid had ushered the London visitors into the room.

How the subsequent explanation was got through Val never quite understood. Frederick, however, performed his part in a satisfactory manner, completely exonerating his brother from the various charges that had been brought against him.

In so doing, his wife and Algy Cavendish supported him, Algy expressing his deep regret that he had ever been induced to suspect his friend of acting dishonourably.

As if in a dream Val saw Aunt Rachael shedding tears, heard Ephraim Barclay apologising honestly and sincerely to him for the mistake into which he had fallen between the

brothers, a fact which raised the Quaker in Val's estimation, since, his character as a man of honour being re-established, poor Ephraim's last hope of winning Ruth had vanished. To his credit it must be said Ephraim bore his double disappointment bravely and well.

Ruth, lying dressed upon her little white bed upstairs, with the window wide open to admit the languid air, heard the cab stop, distinguished a familiar voice amidst the hum going on below.

She was on her feet directly, her listlessness gone, her heart full of wild, sudden hopes. The voice was Val's. Would he venture to come here if something had not transpired to prove him innocent and worthy of her love?

Hastily smoothing her pale golden hair, Ruth crept tremblingly downstairs, that deep musical voice thrilling through her each time it spoke. Unable to bear the suspense she pushed the door open and entered, looking like a pale, beautiful ghost.

"Ruth! darling! I may claim you now! There is nothing to keep us apart any longer!"

Val's arms were around her, his kisses rained upon her face before them all, and Aunt Rachael made no protest. Ruth had a blissful consciousness that things had worked together for good in their case; how she neither knew nor cared in the first flush of her restored happiness. Val was with her again; Val was innocent of the cruel charges brought against him. The bewildering joy that ensued blotted out all else for the time being.

When they had grown a little calmer Marie Curzon stepped forward and took Ruth's hand.

"Forgive me the pain I have caused you to suffer, not wilfully, but owing to a mistake," she said, earnestly. "Your lover is in every way worthy of you, Miss Inglefield. But for me and my husband—his brother—no reflection would ever have been cast upon Valentine Curzon."

As Ruth understood more clearly what had occurred her thankful spirit deepened, her loving trust in Val revived, never again to be shaken. Bending forward she kissed the Frenchwoman's olive cheek.

"From henceforth we must be as sisters," she said, gently. "No, there is nothing to forgive—you were not to blame—but much to be grateful for."

Frederick Valentine Curzon left Penwyrr for London that evening, the richer by a twenty-pound note, which he had borrowed (f) of his brother. It was a relief to get rid of him, and when authentic news of his death reached his relatives a year later on from the Soudan it occasioned no deep regret.

Val and Algy stayed, at Aunt Rachael's invitation, until the next day. Marie Curzon remained altogether. Aunt Rachael kindly offered the lonely, deserted young wife a home, which she was only too thankful to accept.

Val and Ruth were married as soon as the former had passed his examination creditably, and gained permission to kill people as a doctor in the orthodox way. Ruth made a charming wife; her pure, simple, yet gifted nature by degrees lending a higher tone to that of her handsome, pleasure-loving husband, raising him to the call of duty, helping to make of him what—but for her—he would never have become—a distinguished, useful member of society.

Algy Cavendish married his Aurelia with the happiest results. There are so many little Algys and Aurelias now that in looking after them his wife has well-nigh forgotten to be strong-minded, at which Algy secretly rejoices.

The Colonel lives with them, having eschewed matrimony after that cruel exposure with regard to "the most charming woman in the world," Mrs. Whycherley, who, by the way, is still a widow, and likely to remain one.

[THE END.]

GERTRUDE'S TRUST.

-0-

"What do you think that stupid girl has done?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, my dear," said Edward Sterling, with languid interest, dropping his paper, removing his spectacles, and facing his grey-haired, motherly-faced wife, who, although past sixty, still declared "that she was able to do a day's work with the best of them."

"Why, she's gone to work and cleaned out the old brick oven that Grandfather Sterling built ever so many years ago, and has started a fire in the furnace underneath."

"Well, Jane, I don't see anything very stupid in that."

"I didn't order her to do it," said Mrs. Sterling, a little angrily; "and when I demanded why she did it, she laughed in that silly way of hers and answered, 'I bake-a brode-a!' Who ever heard of such nonsense? That oven hasn't been used since I was a little girl, and I've always been able to bake bread in the range."

"I remember the bread that mother used to bake in that old brick oven," said Farmer Sterling, musingly. "Somehow, I think I'd like a slice from a loaf baked there now. Mother's bread had a peculiar flavour, and no doubt it was the oven that caused it."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Mrs. Sterling, tossing her grey curls. "It's rather late in the day for you to throw up to me about your mother's bread. I think it's real mean of you, for I have been a good and faithful wife for forty-one years the fifteenth of next month, and—"

Here she broke down completely, and began to sob in a hysterical way, covering her face with her apron.

"Why, little mother," cried a ringing voice, "what's the matter?"

And a bearded, blue-eyed man of five-and-twenty, with his mother's fresh face, and his father's athletic form, walked quickly across the room and took the sobbing woman in his arms.

"Tears? and on the eve of the happiest day of my life?"

"It's all on account of that outlandish German girl, Tom, that you would bring here to put in my place."

"What's Gertrude been doing now?" queried Tom.

"Why, she's cleared up the old brick bake-oven under the shed," said his father, "and I expect will turn out the wedding-bread and cake in fine style. I remember what elegant baking my mother used to do there, but it hasn't been used since I was married."

"I don't see anything so very terrible in that, little mother," said Tom, and he drew his mother towards him and kissed her cheek.

"Let Gertrude have her way. She'll do nothing wrong; and after you've got used to her, you'll admit that she's a perfect treasure. She's as neat as a pin, a splendid cook, and the very best of housekeepers. Now that I'm to be master here, I want you and father to take a long rest. You've worked hard and faithfully, and I want to make a return for all your tender love and sheltering care. You shall be lady and gentleman now, and Gertrude and I will do the hard work. Dora, you know, is an excellent housekeeper, and with Gertrude to do the drudgery, will make out splendidly. With the help of a good hand and a half-grown boy, I can run the farm. I left word in the village for Lawyer Salvage to come down to the wedding to-morrow, and bring all the papers, and I'll pay off the mortgage on the farm. I drew the money from the bank, and here it is," tapping his breast-pocket. "Seven hundred and fifty-five pounds in good bank-notes."

"Ain't it dangerous to carry so much money with you, Tom?" said his mother, anxiously, forgetting all about the servant-girl and the old brick oven in her solicitude.

"Well, I thought it better to have it so that I could pay off the mortgage to-morrow, and begin life right. I don't want to run away from my wife the day after the marriage, and I'd have to take a trip to town to-morrow to get it."

"You might have written a cheque," said his father.

"So I might!" cried Tom. "How stupid of me not to have thought of that! But the money's all right. I'll leave it with Gertrude, and she'll take good care of it."

"The mercy's sakes!" cried his mother, throwing up her hands in amazement. "You don't mean to say that you're going to leave all that money with that foreign German?"

"Why not?" asked Tom, coolly. "I'll stake my life on her honesty."

"Well, you have more confidence in her than I have," replied his mother; "and depend upon it, you'll rue the day that you brought her into this house."

"Nonsense, little mother!" cried Tom, with a gay laugh. "In a month's time you'll admit what I know—that she's a perfect treasure. But here I'm wasting valuable time. The carriage is at the door, and you and father are not yet dressed. I'll go out and talk to Gertrude and you get ready, for I don't want to be late at my wedding."

And he hurried from the room while his mother, with a mournful sigh, and his father, with a grim smile, began to make preparations for the ten-mile ride to Farmer Thornley, whose pretty daughter Dora their son was to marry that night.

Tom Sterling was the youngest of three sons and the only one living.

He had been a wild boy, and had broken away from parental restraint, when a mere lad, and ran away to sea.

He was gone ten years, and during that time everything went wrong at the farm.

A malignant fever carried away his two brothers; the crops failed and the cattle died; and a business entanglement so involved the honest farmer that he was obliged to mortgage the old farm to save his honour.

In his old age he was barely able to pay the interest on this mortgage and meet the taxes, and he allowed the place to run down.

Finally he was threatened with foreclosure, and the workhouse seemed staring him in the face.

On the very day that Lawyer Salvage notified him that the mortgage must be paid when due, Tom came home—a broad-shouldered, bearded man.

They had given him up long since as dead, and welcomed him with extravagant joy.

He had been successful, and although not possessed of a fortune, had saved enough to pay off the mortgage, make some necessary repairs in the old farm-house, and restock the farm.

One of the first innovations that he made was to insist that his father and mother should hereafter rest; so he hired a stout man to rebuild the fences and make other repairs, and brought Gertrude Pollinsky to preside over the kitchen.

His mother rebelled at this latter arrangement, for the girl could speak but little English, and, as the good farmer's wife declared, had "queer ways."

The girl was eighteen, black-eyed, black-haired, and possessed of a man's strength.

Tom had brought her home in the ship in which he was interested.

She had given assistance to a fugitive Socialist, and had been obliged to flee from home and kindred.

Tom had met the girl, her friendlessness and danger had excited his sympathy, and he had secreted her aboard his ship. She was devotedly attached to him, and he had the utmost faith in her courage and honesty.

Soon after his return, pretty Dora, who had been his playmate in childhood, blushing consented to be his wife, and they were to be married at the bride's home, and on the follow-

ing day would have a wedding feast in the new home to which he was to bring her.

While Farmer Sterling and his wife were getting ready for the journey Tom sought Gertrude in the kitchen.

Her face lighted up when he entered, and she immediately led him out to the shed and called his attention to the big bake-oven which she had cleaned out and polished up, and under which a hot fire was blazing.

"One like-a it home-a," she said, and tears moistened her eyes. "I bake-a pies-a, cake-a and brode-a here."

"A good idea," commented Tom. "You can expect us to-morrow morning. We will return by ten o'clock. Look out for everything while we are away, and, Gertrude—"

here he lowered his voice, glanced hastily around him, and drew the package of bank-notes from his pocket—"here is a large sum of money which I drew from the bank this morning to pay off the mortgage on the farm. Take care of it for me."

"I take-a care," she said, in her quaint English, and thrust the notes in her bosom.

Neither saw the evil face that glared at them through the open window, nor heard the stealthy footsteps of the man whom Tom had hired to build the fences, as he crept around the corner of the shed, and sped through the garden towards the barn.

Presently Mrs. Sterling called from the big sitting-room that they were ready, and with a parting injunction to Gertrude to be careful of the money, Tom hurried out and assisted his father and mother into the carry-all.

As it drove away, Gertrude burst into a German love-song, and the oven having heated sufficiently, she began to fill it with bread and cake and pies.

Everything baked splendidly, and the girl was in raptures over the big cupboard full of dainty eatables, to be served up to the wedding-guests on the morrow.

She ate her supper in the kitchen, fed the poultry and the pigs, milked the cows, and then seating herself so that the light of the great kitchen lamp fell over her shoulder, began industriously to knit.

Shortly after sunset the man came in and she got him his supper.

He had some work yet to do at the barn, and while he was absent, Gertrude, who was still knitting, happened to think of a brood of motherless young chickens, that usually took shelter in the corner of the shed, and had to be covered to protect them from the cold night air.

She set the lamp in the window so that its rays would illumine the shed, and had just finished her task when the man stepped in the doorway and barred her exit.

His little eyes glowed balefully, and he had a stout stick in his hand.

"Look here," he said, roughly, "I don't want to do no murder, but I saw the master give you some money this afternoon, I want it. You needn't lie about it; and I seen you put it in your bosom. Hand it out now, or I'll have to hit you on the head with this stick, and take it from you by force."

"Ha!" cried the girl, and her red face suddenly grew pale, while her hand instinctively stole to the hiding-place of the money.

"Give it up, I say!" continued the man; and he took a step towards her and raised the stick.

"Nevaire!" she shrieked.

And tearing the roll of notes from her bosom, she tossed the package through the open door of the big oven, which was now almost cold.

"Curse you!" cried the man.

And when she retreated into the corner of the shed, he ran to the door of the oven, lighted a match and peered in.

There, far beyond his reach, lay the money that he coveted.

He looked about him for something with which to draw it out, but seeing nothing handy, he lowered his head and began crawling into the oven.

As his heavy boots disappeared through the

opening, Gertrude, quick as a flash, leaped forward, pushed to the heavy iron door and dropped the stout bar that fastened it.

"Now-a," she cried, jubilantly, "who-a got-a the money—you bad-a man-a?" "Let me out!" shrieked the imprisoned thief. "Let me out, I say!"

"Not-a much-a!" was Gertrude's defiant answer; and she danced up and down jubilantly.

"I'll kick down the door, then, and kill you when I get out!" he bellowed.

"Keek away!" retorted the girl. "You keek-a too much-a, I start a big fire. Bake-a you like a pie-a. Ha, ha!"

And she laughed uproariously at her grim facetiousness.

Nothing daunted by her threat, the man began to rain a shower of heavy blows on the iron door, which cracked and trembled.

From long disuse it had rusted badly, and fearing that it might give way, the girl hurried to the kitchen, and getting a shovelful of blazing coals, threw them into the furnace beneath the oven, and piling on dry wood soon had a fire roaring.

When the flames began to crackle the man stopped kicking, and not relishing the idea of being roasted alive, began to beg.

"I thought-a you stop," said Gertrude. "Now I make-a what-a you call bargain. No keek, no fire! Keek, roast-a you like pig-a."

Thoroughly frightened, the man promised to make no further attempt to escape, and Gertrude put out the fire.

She got the lamp from the kitchen, brought out her knitting and a chair, and seating herself in front of the oven, prepared to watch the imprisoned robber.

The long night hours passed slowly away, but the girl never relaxed her vigilance, and the only sound that disturbed the stillness was the click, click of her needles as they flew in and out.

Occasionally a deep groan sounded hollowly from the oven, but the man inside made no further attempt to kick down the iron door.

Day dawned, and the awakened poultry clamoured loudly for their breakfast; but Gertrude never stirred.

When at half-past nine the wedding guests drove up to the farm-house, Gertrude, whose eyes were red and swollen, leaped to her feet, with a sigh of relief, and, running to the corner of the house, called out to Tom Sterling to come quickly.

When he ran towards her, she led the way to the shed, and pointing to the oven, told the story of her night's adventure.

The thief was taken out, considerably the worse for his night's imprisonment, and two of the young men guests volunteered to take him to the county gaol.

The money was found intact, and Gertrude at once became a heroine.

Mrs. Sterling's face softened, and tears came into her eyes when they told her the story; and going up to the girl she threw her arms around her neck and kissed her.

"You are a treasure, Gertrude, and Tom was right. Forgive me if I have been cross to you." G. W. S.

NO STOVES.—There isn't such a thing as a stove or fireplace in all Mexico. The temperature remains at about sixty degrees the year round, and, while the stranger will complain of being chilly at first, he will soon become accustomed to the atmosphere and not suffer, provided he wears flannel underclothing and puts on a light overcoat if he goes out after sundown. The cooking is all done in Dutch ovens with charcoal, and ranges were never heard of here. Coal is imported from England, and costs five pounds a ton; wood is brought down from the mountains on the backs of men and donkeys, and is worth four pounds a cord.

VERNON'S DESTINY.

—30—

CHAPTER XI.

MR. NEIL Charteris shared the opinion of the old rhymist, who sang "Happy's the wooing that's not long a-doing." He would have liked to marry Lit out of hand; and his parents being old fashioned, disinterested people, thought more of their boy's happiness than of rank and health. But for the sudden deaths in the family there is no doubt Lit would have been transformed into the Honourable Mrs. Charteris within a few weeks of her engagement.

"She is such a dear little thing!" said Neil's mother to her husband. "I think our boy has chosen wisely. Lit is a fortune in herself."

"I am sure Lit is," said the Doctor—we beg his pardon, the new Lord Charteris—with a smile; "but Nellie, even to please you I decline to admit that she is a little thing."

"You know what I meant."

"Yes, and I think with you that, for many reasons, the sooner the young people are settled the better. But there is a great deal to think of first."

"Ways and means," said the kind, motherly creature. "I know. It seems to me, dear, we are in a most anomalous position."

"True enough, Nellie, I am Lord Charteris, but I have no increase of wealth to support my dignity. On the contrary, I am far poorer, for my father's house was always a second home to me and mine. The dear old man was most generous in his gifts to us. Now we are never likely to set foot within Charteris again."

"Was Mrs. Denzil so very objectionable?" asked Lady Charteris, womanlike, wandering from the point in question.

"She was a very pretty, stylish, young woman. Ashwin was favourably impressed with her. My pervading impression was that she had no heart."

"No heart!"

"Would any true woman be able to look perfectly serene and satisfied as Reginald Denzil's wife? Would any girl with a spark of feeling in her, knowing the origin of the estrangement between her and her father's relations, be able to meet them with a simper and talk prettily of the weather?"

"You are too hard on her, dear."

"I am sorry for it. Well, Nellie, to business; I don't see why I should not give up the practice to Neil. I had not meant to retire for a few years but there is something awkward in Lord Charteris being a village surgeon. I should lose my patients because they would be afraid to summon me. Do you think, wife of mine, you can bear to give up the Rosery to Neil and his wife, while you and I settle down in some continental town where the youngsters can pick up French for nothing, and a hundred pounds will do the work of three at home."

"Could you bear it?"

The Doctor laughed.

"I fancy, Nellie, I could bear anything while I had you and the children, added to which I own it will save my pride a pang if I am spared the sight of Mrs. Reginald Denzil taking possession of the Hall."

"Then there is no question about it. We will go as soon as possible."

"Softly, softly, Nellie. We must wait till Neil has his wife, and I don't think the young people should be married before July. Mrs. Denzil herself told me she had no thought of occupying the Hall at present."

"Why do you call her Mrs. Denzil. She is your own niece."

Lord Charteris shrugged his shoulders.

"There is not a trait of our family about her, Nell. I expect I am a foolish old man, but that girl has given me a little disappointment."

She put one hand on his and looked into his face as she asked him how.

"I was very fond of her father. I felt for him when he made that rash marriage; and if I had been of any importance in the family and my support of any use to them, they need never have gone to India. I was with Charley (you remember it, Nell) a great deal before they sailed, and I couldn't help seeing whatever sacrifice he made for his wife her love repaid him fully. I believe he was as happy in her affection as I have been in yours, Nell, and that is saying a good deal."

"Did you not see her?"

"Only once. She struck me then as being more of an angel than a woman. When once I had seen her, Nellie, I understood my brother's infatuation completely; I have always thought it natural."

"I wish the child had come to us!"

"It would have been impossible to propose it."

My father and Tom would have been horrified. Nellie, my mind has often run on this child; and but for my father's age, which made opposing him a solemn thing, should have made acquaintance with her long ago. I thought she must be something above the common run of girls—the daughter of that sweet, sad-faced wife and a brave soldier like my brother; even the news of her marriage only awoke my sympathy. I thought she had been dragged into some unsuitable match by her romantic feelings. I meant to be her protector against her husband. Nell, I have seen her, and she is perfectly contented with her lot; she is all smiles and dimples. Ashwin called her a pretty, taking woman. I thought her a soulless syren, with no heart in her."

Lady Charteris looked thoughtful.

"Strange that she should have no heart, when her parents' troubles came from their having too much!"

"Aye; well, Lena is a sensible young thing. If Mr. and Mrs. Denzil (he has dropped the Captain, I believe) come to rule at Charteris she will have sense enough to know how to steer clear of any intimacy with her. Nellie, I may be prejudiced, but when I came away from Mrs. Denzil my one feeling was I should not like any one I cared for to be intimate with her."

"Poor child!"

"Child! She is a woman, I assure you, and one far more versed in the ways of the world than you are."

"I wish Tom had lived."

"That's pride, Nellie!" said her husband, gravely. "Of course it would have been far easier for us to give up the headship of the family to him than to this slip of a girl."

"You know Maude is coming to us? Perhaps we had better not settle anything until she has paid her visit."

Truth to say, the family at the Rosery were not a little afraid of Lady Maude Charteris. Colonel Tom was the only one of his brethren who had married well. He chose an heiress and a duke's daughter. He only married when he was on the point of leaving England, so that his relations had no chance of intimacy with his bride.

They knew absolutely nothing of her, except that she was some years older than her husband, and had appeared to merge her identity so entirely into his that in all these years no fact of her individual life had ever transpired.

Lord Charteris met her in London, and his Nellie went into the hall to welcome her with a shyness she could not prevent. Imagine her surprise. She saw the sweetest of elderly ladies with soft, silvery hair, and gentle, refined features.

Lady Maude was at this time over sixty. She had never been a beauty, but yet there was a strange charm in her calm, thoughtful face. There was no grandeur, no ceremony, about her. She kissed the shrinking Lady Charteris as though she had known her all her life.

"It is so kind of you to welcome me, Elinor. May I call you Elinor?"

"Please do," said the mistress of the Rosery.

"Oh, Lady Maude, what a sad home-coming this must be for you?"

She took the widow up into the room prepared for her, and was astonished to find she had brought no maid, and meant to be her own attendant.

"I could not tell," said Lady Maude, half apologetically. "I had heard from Charteris that he inherited the title only, and I thought a servant might be in the way."

"I must send one of the girls to help you. I have half-a-dozen daughters at home."

"How glad you must be! My brave boys," with a little sigh, "were very dear to me, but I always longed for a little girl. I tried hard to persuade the Colonel to adopt his orphan niece when I read of his brother's death, but he would not hear of it."

Meg arrived to assist her aunt, and in three days' time Lady Maude had endeared herself to the whole family. They discussed their plans before her, they told her their little confidences as naturally as though they had known her all their days.

"Don't let the children wait!" said Lady Maude to her sister-in-law one day, when she had been a month at the Rosery. "I can see that Charteris is anxious to be on the wing. Don't think it will pain me to see Neil bring home his bride. You had not seen my husband and my sons for years; why try Neil's patience for a mere ceremonial form?"

Lady Charteris half sighed. "It will be a great relief to us to get away before the Hall is occupied. Maude, you cannot imagine what that place has been to us! Meg had acted as its mistress for years. All my children loved it; it was to them and us a second home!"

"Still it is right it should pass to Charles's daughter—right in law and justice."

"But you have not seen her! My husband says there is not a trait of her ancestors about her. She has married a man whose evil ways are a household word, and she seems perfectly happy!"

Lady Maude looked another way. Perhaps she was thinking of her own case. She had married a man proverbial for his good qualities, his upright conduct, his high moral sentiments, and she had been miserable. Perhaps this recollection made her very gentle in her judgment of her unknown niece.

"If she comes I shall try and get intimate with her, and let her know she has a firm friend in me."

Lady Charteris started.

"Do you mean to stay here, Maude?"

"I have taken that pretty cottage almost opposite the Hall gates. I can't explain it to you clearer, but I yearn towards the old place. I feel nearer my husband and sons at Charteris than I could be at any other place."

"Neil and Lena will be delighted."

"Neil has been kind enough to say so; and, Elinor, if you will not think me grasping, I want you to give me Meg."

"To give you Meg?"

"She shall come back to you on long visits when you please; but Elinor, my home will be so lonely, and yours is full of children. You spared Meg to her grandfather; can't you spare her to me?"

"Willingly, only—"

"It shall be just as though she were my daughter," explained Lady Maude. "If she leaves me for a husband I will give her a dowry worthy a daughter of Charteris. If she remains unwed, I will leave her an ample provision."

"But, Maude, you must not be too generous. Think of your own family."

Lady Maude smiled.

"I have no relations except my brother and his son. One is richer than I am; and the other will some day be his heir. My husband had a turn for speculations, and whatever he touched prospered. My income is now ten thousand a year. If Meg comes to me I shall settle five thousand on her at once as a provision for the future. The rest of my property will revert at my death to the reigning Lord Charteris, and be settled so as to go with the title."

"But Maude—"

"My dear Elinor, you have a big family, and if your husband's savings launch them in life and assure their future, he will not have much left for Neil, and Neil is my favourite. I cannot restore the Hall to him, but I can leave him sufficient fortune to support his dignity."

"You are too generous."

"You would not say so if you knew the happiness I have found here. Why, Elinor, ten fortunes could not repay the kindness I have received from you and yours!"

Lena was written to, and begged to fix an early day for her wedding. She was to be married in Beauville, because she wished her mother and the "fry" to be present at the ceremony, and no one had the audacity to risk the thought of the expense of conducting them to England. Besides, a Charteris would need a grand ceremonial in his own land, whereas simplicity and economy might prevail abroad.

Lord and Lady Charteris would remain at the Rosery until Neil returned from his honeymoon; then, when they had welcomed the young couple, and a week or so had been spent in initiating Lena into the duties of her new position, they and their younger children would take flight for Brussels, and the Doctor and his bride would have no other relations close at hand but Lady Maude and her dear adopted daughter Meg.

"Lena," said her lover the night before the wedding. "How is that Mrs. Merton and her husband are not here? Surely, my dear, you did not think I shared my poor grandfather's prejudices, and would not meet the late guardian of my cousin, Mrs. Denzil?"

To his surprise Lit turned to him with a little sob, and then flung herself weeping on his shoulder.

"My darling!" said Neil, much concerned; "what troubles you? Surely you have no secrets from me?"

Lena calmed herself by an effort.

"I cannot bear to think of Isola."

"And why not?"

"I have never seen her since the time of the accident. In reality, I have never seen her since she went to Merton Park last autumn. I think the Major and she must have quarrelled about your cousin's marriage. We never heard any particulars, but early in the spring James went abroad alone."

"And Mrs. Merton?"

"She has a very pretty bijou villa near the Parks, but she is seldom in town."

"She prefers Merton Park?"

"No, the house is shut up. I suppose she gets tired of London and travels about. He seldom knows where she is. Still we did hear by chance last week that she was in town, and wrote off at once, begging her to come to our wedding."

"And what was her answer?"

"I had rather not tell you."

"Nonsense!"

"But I had, indeed."

"We won't begin by having secrets, Lit."

Lit blushed.

"Isa wrote that she wished me all possible happiness, but she was sick to death of the name of Charteris, and she must refuse to meet anyone who bore it."

Neil laughed.

"Come Lit, that was frank, at any rate. I daresay she did have a great deal of trouble, you know, about my cousin's escapade."

Lit looked grave.

"I can't bear to think of that."

"Why not?"

"I am sure she is miserable."

"Who? Helen?"

"Yes."

"I assure you Mrs. Denzil is in the best of spirits. I have seen her, you know, and I declare I never saw a less unhappy-looking wife."

"But she must be miserable?"

"Why?"

The girl so soon to be his wife blushed.

"She married Reginald Denzil."

"And he is a bad man; but, Lit, love is blind, and Mrs. Denzil may imagine her husband immaculate for all we know."

"It is not that!"

"What then, sweetheart?"

"Captain Denzil loved my sister. I don't know much of such things, only the way he looked at her made me feel she was more to him than the whole world. Then he got into Merton's house under the disguise of her brother—he was there for six weeks. I don't believe he ever cared for Helen Charteris. He married her for her fortune, and perhaps because he did not want to excite the Major's suspicions. How can she be happy with a husband passionately in love with another woman?"

"It is a sad business."

"Neil, if ever she comes to Charteris Hall I should like to be friends with her."

Lit hesitated a moment.

"You shall; but why do you pity her?"

"I think happiness came by her, and she did not see it. I am certain Guy Vernon loved her."

"She did not look to me in the least like Vernon's ideal."

"Have you heard anything of him since?"

"Nothing; he is said to be abroad."

Well, they were married. It was probably the simplest union ever celebrated of two people whose names would be in the peerage. But Neil and Lena cared not a whit for pomp or show. They spent a fortnight very pleasantly roaming about Normandy, and then they turned homewards.

"You are sure you can be happy in the country?" asked Mr. Charteris of his bride; "you won't be regretting your French gaieties?"

Lit gave him a wicked little pinch.

"I shall regret nothing while I have you."

"Prettily spoken, little lady. Lena, I often bless that railway accident."

"It brought you a shocking bargain."

"I'll risk that."

"I'm so glad Meg is to stay near us!"

"Aunt Maude is no end of a trump. You'll find her like a kind of extra mother."

And, in point of fact, Lit had never received a warmer welcome from her own parent than that bestowed on her both by Lady Charteris and her sister-in-law. They seemed to vie with each other in petting the young bride, and making her feel at home.

"May I walk in the Park?" young Mrs. Charteris asked her mother-in-law. "I shall never forget how fond I was of the grounds, and they must look so lovely in summer! Are we able to go in them still, or are they the private property of Mrs. Denzil?"

"The whole village may walk in the Park—the public part, I mean—but none of us have ever been. We cannot bear to see the house, and know we are no longer free to enter it. Still, my dear, there is not the slightest objection to your going there; our staying away is a mere fancy."

"I should like to go."

She went alone—in these days it was very rare for Lit to be alone.

It was a beautiful August day, the summer sunshine was bright but not too warm; a soft wind blew pleasantly; the grass was green as frequent rain would make it, and was smooth as velvet; clearly things were kept up carefully under Mrs. Denzil's régime.

Lit met the agent to the estate as she passed through the lodge gates; he paused to speak to her with lifted hat.

"I may welcome you amongst us, I hope, Mrs. Charteris. As Mrs. Denzil's agent I fear to be an intruder if I present myself at the Rosery, but I would like Lord Charteris to know that if I remain in the lady's employment it is only because I was born and bred on the place, and can't bear to leave it."

Lit smiled at him bewitchingly; the old man lost his heart at once.

"Why should you leave it, Mr. Pearson. Do you think we are such monsters we don't want Charteris to look its best; and be well."

cared for, just because it is not ours? As it happens, I am peculiarly interested in Mrs. Denzil, and should like to hear all you can tell me about her."

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "She's a hard lady, Mrs. Charteris. My salary has been cut down; she has dismissed nearly all the servants. There is only one left to keep the house in order, and one man to look to the grounds. It seems ridiculous."

"I suppose she will never live here, and does not care to spend money on a place she has not seen!"

"She wants it kept up at as little cost as possible."

"Have you seen her?"

"I have seen her once, Mrs. Charteris—a pretty woman enough, but without a trace of the old family. Were you going on to the house, ma'am. The old butler and his wife are still there, and will be proud to welcome you."

Lena went on alone. A strange gravity had fallen upon her. Six months before she had never heard the name of Charteris; six months before her greatest desire was success in the journalistic world, her greatest fear that the old feud between her sister Isola and Reginald Denzil might rise from its smouldering ashes into a burning flame. Well, now both hope and fear were crushed, little as it mattered to the Honourable Mrs. Charteris compared to how it would have affected Miss Travers. The name of "Denzil" was becoming famous, and anything signed under that name at present met with a ready acceptance, while the very fact that James Morton had parted from the wife he loved more than life showed how true had been her sister's foreboding.

As she walked in the beautiful grounds of Charteris it was but natural that Lit should think of their owner. She had never seen the girl who had once been Helen Charteris, but she had heard so much of her that she felt a strange interest in her fate.

The letter from Major Merton inviting Lit to the Park had told her of "his dear little ward with her blue eyes and childlike face." Little as Guy Vernon had said of her, that little betrayed she was for him the one woman in the world, and the history of her birth and parentage was so romantic that it was alone enough to enchain Lena's fancy.

How the daughter of brave, generous Charles Charteris, how the innocent child of the Major's love, how the girl who had known how to win the heart of fastidious Guy Vernon, how such an one could have eloped from her home with a man like Reginald Denzil, Lena could not think!

"She was not poor," mused the girl, "so it could not have been that; she had a happy home at the Park. She must have known she had no common share in Guy Vernon's heart. What madness, what caprice, then, had driven her into the Captain's arms?"

Lena stood watching the grand old mansion, bathed just then in a flood of summer sunshine, when suddenly she became aware she was not alone; at a stone's throw from her someone else stood gazing up at the battlements of the old Hall, other eyes than Lena's were noting every landmark.

Miss Charteris glanced at her companion, and wondered who she was, where she came from, and what strange chance brought her there. She saw a shrinking form dressed in rusty black, a heavy shawl—strange equipment in July!—hiding her figure, so that Lena could only notice that her face and ungloved hands were painfully thin, that there were tear stains on her hollow cheeks, and dark circles underneath her eyes.

Shabby as the stranger was, timid and ill-assured as was her bearing, Miss Charteris decided she was a lady. The sun's rays fell full upon her wild dark hair, turning it to gold. But for the look of suffering and sadness, but for the strange, hopeless, cowed expression of the girl's face, Lit would have called her beautiful.

Miss Travers invariably acted on impulse, and the Honourable Mrs. Charteris seemed

disposed to follow her example, for she went up to the lonely watcher, and without the slightest attempt at apology, introduction, or explanation, said, simply,—

"I am sure you are in trouble; do let me help you!"

The stranger opened her eyes; one would have said it was very long since she had heard a word of kindness. She looked at Lit with a mist of tears half hiding her from her sight; and Lit, generous, impulsive, warmhearted Lit, wished she hadn't been equipped in her cream satin, because it formed such a cruel contrast to the other's rusty black.

"Am I doing any harm?" asked the girl, wearily, and her manner showed she was pretty well used to finding herself in the way, and hearing commands of "Move on." "I never meant to trespass; I thought this was a public footpath."

"So it is," said Mrs. Charteris, kindly, "and you have every bit as much right here as I have, only you looked in such trouble I couldn't help speaking to you."

"I am in trouble!"

"You will tell me what it is, and let me help you," cried Lit, persuasively.

"No one in the world could do that!"

Mrs. Charteris laid her hand gently on the black dress.

"I know that no one can comfort us for the loss of loved ones who have left us. If death has caused you sorrow I know I cannot help you, only—"

"Only you were too kind to pass me by," said the other, slowly. "Do you know a lady's voice has not spoken to me for months? It is so long since I have heard kind words that I always forget their sound."

Lit made another attempt to extract her confidence.

"Are you a stranger here? I do not think I have ever seen you before. But then it is only a week since I came myself."

"I was never here before."

"It is a pretty place!" said Lit, gently.

"Have you come to stay?"

"I shall never stay anywhere!" said the stranger. "I have no home, no friends, and, besides, I am afraid I keep moving on—moving on. I think there will never be any rest for me until I am in my grave!"

"But you must not talk like that! You are so young; things must mend in time!"

"No time can mend my trouble, and the one friend I long for is—Death!"

Lit changed the subject.

"You were looking at this old house as if you loved it. I love it dearly, too. Is it not a beautiful old place?"

"Lovely! One might feel safe here!"

Mrs. Charteris wondered if her mind was wandering. She almost feared so, and the rusty black-robed figure went on.

"You spoke so kindly to me just now, perhaps you would not be angry if I asked you to tell me something?"

"I will tell you anything I know!"

"Who lives here?"

Lit started! It was the last question she had expected.

"No one now. There are only servants in the house. It's mistress is away in Devonshire, I think!"

A look of such keen disappointment crossed the girl's face. Lit's heart ached.

"Did you expect to find anyone here you knew?"

"I thought an old gentleman lived here—Charteris of Charteris Hall. I have the name on a bit of paper. My father wrote it down long years ago. I think he had once met one of Lord Charteris's sons, and been good to him. I had hoped for my father's sake the old gentleman would help me!"

"Lord Charteris has been dead six months!"

"Oh!"

"But his son is living, and still in the village, though he goes away to Brussels tomorrow; and I have married his grandson, and I am sure my husband and I will help you!"

"Then this old place is yours"—looking at

it again wistfully. "I thought you said no one lived here?"

Lit shook her head.

"It belongs to a cousin of ours—Mrs. Reginald Denzil. She does not care to live here!"

"Have you ever seen her?"

"Never! but my husband has. He does not like her. He says she is not good!"

The woman listened eagerly. But it seemed as though her sympathy leaned towards Mrs. Reginald Denzil, for she said, wistfully,—

"So few people are good!"

"But Mr. Denzil is a very bad man!"

"So I have heard!"

"And if his wife were a good woman she could not be happy with him!"

"Perhaps she is not happy?"

"But she is! My husband and his father want to see her in Devonshire to get her to sign some papers connected with her property, and they said they had never seen anyone look so perfectly satisfied with her lot!"

But Lena might have been speaking to the old stone walls, for before her sentence was half ended her solitary listener had fallen fainting to the ground, and young Mrs. Charteris, after a moment's debate whether in such a case she might break the rule laid down by her husband, and enter Mrs. Denzil's house, decided that Aunt Maude's aid would be far more effectual than that of the venerable housekeeper, and sped swiftly through the Park to the cottage.

Lady Maude and Meg did not prove themselves unworthy her confidence of them. Not only did they come back themselves to the scene of her alarm, but they brought their gardener, in whose strong arms the unhappy wail was carried back to the cottage and laid on the sofa in Meg's peculiar parlour.

"I shall send Neil to look at her!"

"You had better not!" said her sister-in-law, gently. "Lit, she seems in great trouble, and women upon their hearts more readily when they have only sister-women about them. Leave her to us, and I promise if the case defies our skill we will send down to the Rosery for Neil!"

Lit was easily convinced, but yet she lingered.

"Isn't it stupid, Meg, but I can't bear to leave her. I keep on feeling I have known her before!"

"It is the peculiar right of novelists to be romantic," said Meg, wickedly. "Now, Lit, if you don't depart at once, you'll be late for tea."

Left alone, the two elder ladies—for Meg Charteris had passed the line which separates the girl from the woman, and was far more prudent and experienced in many things than even the young matron, Lena—left alone, I say, the widow and Meg held a short consultation.

"I think she is going to be very ill," said Meg. "You won't send her away, aunt?"

Lady Maude shook her head.

"I will keep her until she is well; but, Meg, I would rather not send for your mother. I can't help thinking, from Lit's account, this poor girl has suffered cruelly at the hands of someone connected in some way with Charteris. Neil would be prompt to avenge her wrongs, and as the future head of the house he ought not to embroil himself with his relations. No one can be angry with two quiet women like us if we choose to help a sister woman."

It was a long time before consciousness returned; then they saw that their patient had eyes of a dark, lustrous blue, and that, despite the traces she bore of poverty and suffering, her face had a strange, sweet charm.

"She looks nothing but a baby," whispered Lady Maude to her niece, but the girl caught the word.

"I shall be twenty very soon," she said, simply, "but I feel much older. Please, am I going to die?"

"No!" said Lady Maude, promptly. "You have only fainted; you were talking to my niece, and something she said, or, perhaps the heat upset you, and you fainted. We had no idea where you lived, and so we brought you here."



[LYING ON MEG'S SOFA, HER POVERTY ALL HIDDEN, SHE LOOKED LIKE SOME STRAY, WANDERING PRINCESS.]

The blue eyes looked gratefully into the lady's face, the lips moved as though in thanks. Lady Maude's whole heart went out to the stranger.

"Will you tell us where you live, that I may send and relieve your friends' anxiety?"

"I live no where."

Lying on Meg's sofa, with a soft Indian shawl hiding her paltry dress, the sun's rays turning her hair to threads of gold, her poverty all hidden, she looked like some stray, wandering princess; and yet she said quite gravely that she was a vagrant—she lived nowhere.

Perhaps she did not know enough of the world's harsh blindness to realize the ignominy under which her answer branded her; perhaps she had felt so much pain and sorrow, no amount of humiliation could hurt her now, for she announced the fact as though it were a very simple statement, involving neither shame nor degradation.

"I live nowhere!"

Meg bent over her, and kissed her in tender pity.

Lady Maude, who, duke's daughter though she was, had less pride than her servants, took the little cold hand in hers.

"My dear—my dear, you may have quarrelled with your friends, you may have left your home—but surely, somewhere, there must be those whose very hearts ache for your safe return to them?"

The wail shook her head. "No."

"Have you no mother?"

A convulsive shudder passed over the girl's whole frame, her thin hand plucked nervously at the old Indian shawl they had given her for a coverlid.

"You had a father," whispered Meg, "Lena was telling us you had been speaking of him to her."

The girl caught Meg's hand.

"Lena! did you say Lena? Was that lady I met in the park with the clear, beautiful eyes called Lena?"

"Yes," said Meg, quite unable to understand her excitement, "but it is impossible you can have seen her before; when she was Miss Travers she lived abroad. It is only since she married my brother that she has come to England."

She half raised herself on her pillows, started to her feet with one bitter cry.

"Lena Travers! Heaven help me then, they will be on my track. I must go, I dare not stay. Oh! ladies, if there is one grain of pity in your hearts, help me to get away—to hide myself. Oh, don't let me stay a minute. Don't you hear? Miss Travers has seen me! They will be on my track—will drag me back to worse than death! Oh, save me—help!"

Terrified beyond measure, Meg and her aunt tried to assure the poor creature she was safe with them, that no one should betray her, for they would hide her from all the world. She did not seem even to hear their reasonings, it was as though that one wild burst of passion had exhausted her strength. She sat and looked at Meg with the pleading agony sometimes seen in the eyes of dumb animals who are in trouble.

"She does not hear us," said Meg, in a whisper. "I think she is half stunned. What are we to do?"

"Take her away."

"But I cannot bear to lose sight of her; she interests me strangely."

"We will go with her. I don't mind if all your family laugh at us, Meg; we are free and our own mistresses. There's your good old nurse settled in one of the suburbs of Gos'ter. Twelve miles drive, and we are there. She will help us to take care of this poor creature until we either restore her to her friends or see her health recovered."

Lady Maude had not been at the head of Colonial society for nothing. Gentle and submissive as she was, yielding and sweet, she knew how to assert herself on occasions and make herself obeyed. Her mind once made up, her own things and Meg's were packed in no

time, and the roomy carriage which was the one sign of her wealth she loved brought round. In this they placed the wail, her head on Lady Maude's shoulder, her hand clasped in Meg's.

"You are not going to give me up? You will not betray me, or let Lena Travers set them on my track?"

"We are going to hide you from everyone," returned Lady Maude; "a dear old friend of ours will take care of you, and we shall stay, too, until you are quite well."

She looked at her new friend with the trust of a child, and in another moment was asleep.

"Your father and mother will think me beside myself, Meg," whispered Lady Maude, "but I can't help it. Something stronger than myself seems to draw me to this poor young creature."

Meg had to wipe her own eyes before she answered.

"You are doing just what I want you to. Aunt, I never loved you so much before."

But when the carriage stopped at the old nurse's house about eight o'clock; and she had heard their story, she looked very grave.

"You will help us, nurse," pleaded Meg; "she has no friends, and we have promised her you will take her in."

"And we will stay to help you in the care of her," put in Lady Maude. "I know money will not influence you, nurse, but my purse is ready for all her wants."

"My lady," said the good old servant, "and my dear Miss Meg, it's not me who could refuse you; and, besides, the poor child has a face that would move a heart of stone; but I'm thinking she's more ill than you know of, and I'd better send for the Doctor."

The old nurse was quite right in her conjecture, for when the morning broke the August sun shone upon a little face its setting had not seen. A little premature baby was in Meg's arms, and its mother hovered between life and death.

(To be continued.)



[A MINUTE LATER THERE STOOD BEFORE HIM NO LESS A PERSON THAN THECKLA MARRIOTT HERSELF.]

NOVELLETTE.]

THE NEW BEAUTY.

—30:—

CHAPTER I.

It was the end of June, and the London season was at its height. Lights flashed from the windows, carriages filled with beautiful women in superb toilettes rolled up to the doors, and strains of music issued from within, rising and falling in delicious cadences on the balmy softness of the midsummer night.

In one of the most stately houses in G—square a ball was being given, and it was unlike the general run of balls, in the fact of a Royal Prince and Princess being present, and making a brilliant scene yet more brilliant.

Amongst the guests was a young and extremely handsome man, whose face seemed somehow out of place in that haunt of pleasure, for it wore a gloomy, preoccupied expression, which showed that his thoughts were far away. He was leaning against a plush-draped doorway, his gaze wandering listlessly about amongst the dancers. Suddenly a gleam of interest came into his eyes, and turning to his companion—a man some ten years older than himself—he said,—

"Gaston, who is that girl speaking to Lady Edmond at the end of the room?"

The other put up his eyeglass before replying.

"Oh! you mean the new beauty! Her name is Marriott, and the man on whose arm she is leaning is her father. Pretty girl, isn't she?"

"She is something more than that!" was the emphatic reply; and Lord Dunster, who was not given to general admiration, kept his eyes fixed upon the young girl until at last she, as if compelled by some magnetic attrac-

tion, lifted hers, and looked him straight in the face.

She was worthy of admiration—a tall, queenly girl, with a superb figure, and a face whose creamy pallor was lighted up by a carmine fire on either cheek. Her eyes were long, dark, and lustrous, shaded by thick black lashes, while her finely-pencilled brows, not arched, but beautifully level, gave an Egyptian cast to features that were in themselves rather of an Eastern type.

"I have never seen or heard of her before," went on Lord Dunster, as she turned away.

"Is she an American?"

"No, I think not. The fact is, no one exactly knows who or what she is, but she appeared in society about six weeks ago, and since then she has become the rage. Her photograph is in every window, milliners call their novelties after her name, and no party is complete without her presence. Her father must be an immensely rich man, for he lives in fine style, and spends his money like a prince. The Duke of Restford is hanging about after the girl, and, if rumour speaks the truth, it is not unlikely that he will lay his strawberry leaves at her feet."

"Do you know her personally?" asked Lord Dunster.

"Certainly."

"Well enough to introduce me?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then do so, will you?"

"With pleasure," Captain Gaston replied, and forthwith led the young nobleman up to Miss Marriott, who was seated on a velvet lounge, talking to a group of men—or rather it would be more correct to say *listening* to them, for she rarely spoke, and did not seem to take any particular interest in their conversation.

"Miss Marriott, will you permit me to present my friend, Lord Dunster?" said the officer, bowing low before her, and a few minutes later the young nobleman found him-

self alone with her, for a dance was just beginning, and the others took their departure in order to look for their respective partners.

"Are you engaged for this valse?" asked Dunster, as the music struck up.

"No."

"Then may I have the pleasure?"

"I think not," she returned, with a negligent smile. "I do not care for valseing, and would much prefer sitting out the dance if you do not mind."

"Certainly not, but you will let me take you to the conservatory, where it is so much cooler than it is here?"

She accepted his arm, and they quitted the ball-room, with its glittering chandeliers, and gorgeous floral decorations, for the cool, green shade of the adjoining conservatory. Tall palms were growing in big pots, and brilliant tropical plants bloomed out the frail sweetness of their lives, while a little marble fountain, plashing into its basin among the broad, green leaves of the water-lilies, made a gentle rippling sound, that mingled harmoniously with the strains of the valse played by the band.

"You are different to most young ladies in not caring for dancing!" Lord Dunster observed, watching her as an artist might have watched a beautiful picture; and, indeed, she looked most lovely, leaning back amongst the green leaves, with the rich laces of her dress lying in billowy folds at her feet, and the sapphires and diamonds at her throat glittering with every movement of the graceful head.

"Yes, I suppose I am different to most young ladies, and not in that particular alone," she said, unfurling her fan of white ostrich feathers, and waving it gently to and fro. "Most girls like gaiety and going out in the world, but I do not."

"Really? You surprise me. I should have thought that at the present moment you were at the very summit of a woman's ambition."

A strange expression came on her face; he only caught it momentarily, but it looked like *horror*.

"I prefer a country life," she replied. "I think in these few weeks I have grown to hate the glare and glitter of crowded gas-lit saloons, and the constant sound of what is called pleasure. To me it seems forced and artificial. Do you think it strange I should say this to you, who are almost a stranger to me?" she demanded, quickly. "I have not grown sufficiently used to the ways of the world to become conventional yet."

"And long may you be preserved from being so!" he exclaimed, fervently. "Still, this is your first season, and you are young enough to change."

"Yes, I suppose so. After all, I am not so very young—not so young as I look," she continued. "I am one-and-twenty, and that is a responsible age, is it not?"

He smiled, and she looked up at him with an answering smile. As she did so the light fell more fully on his face than it had yet done, and some familiarity seemed to strike her, for the colour all faded from her cheeks, and she made a half-shrinking, backward movement.

"What is it?" he asked, rather alarmed at this sudden change of expression.

"Nothing! Only your face reminded me of someone I once knew!" She stopped, her breath coming rather quickly; then, after a minute's pause, she added,—

"Have you any brothers?"

His face darkened.

"I had one brother!"

"And his name was —?"

"Hubert Thelluson. Dunster is the name of the place from which I take my title!"

The young girl was looking straight before her, her cheeks still white, and her lips set together in a firm line, as if she were trying her utmost to keep calm.

She was a girl of wonderful nerve and self-control, and presently she turned to him, saying in her usual voice,—

"Shall we go back to the ball-room again? That value must be nearly over now!"

"Oh, no! it is not. Of course I will take you back if you wish it! But I think it is so much pleasanter in here!"

"As you will!" she said. "By the way, how is it I have never seen you before?"

"Because I only returned to England to-day. My motive for coming here to-night was to see one of the ministers, who I knew would be present. I am certainly in no mood for dissipation myself, and if I had not had a weighty reason I should most assuredly not have become one of Lady Edmond's guests. However, independently of that, I am very glad I came!"

"Why?"

He fixed his eyes meaningly on her face. "Need you ask? Because I have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance?"

She made a quick, impatient movement.

"Oh, if you only knew how sick I am of all those stereotyped compliments!" she exclaimed, with a long sigh.

"I did not intend to pay you a compliment!" he said, earnestly. "Believe me, I meant every word I said! There are some acquaintances that languish on for years without making any progress, and die a natural death at last. There are others that spring into friendship at one bound. I do not feel as if you were a stranger to me, although an hour ago I had never set eyes on your face!"

This was strange language from so complete a man of the world as Lord Dunster, and if anyone had prophesied it yesterday he would have laughed them to scorn. But he was under the influence of a spell too subtle for resistance; for this girl, with her Egyptian eyes, and proud, and mouth, had touched him as no woman had ever yet had power to do.

By a movement that was not without a suggestion of hauteur, she recalled him to himself, and made him aware that he was saying more than he had any right to say.

"You are very good!" she observed, rising as she spoke, and drawing her awn'down mantle close over the polished marble of her bare shoulders. "but I certainly have no claim on your friendship, and in all probability we shall never meet again—at least, after the end of this season. Be kind enough to take me back to my father."

He bowed, and obeyed; and after she had dismissed him with a graceful word of farewell he stood where she left him, looking after her, and the tall, dark, swarthy man on whose arm she leaned.

"So that is her father!" he muttered to himself. "Well, I cannot say that I admire him, and, what is more, I do not think he looks like a gentleman. Who is he, I wonder?—where did he spring from?—how does he get his money?"

To his surprise, he saw the girl and her father bidding their hostess farewell, and disappearing from the room—which was strange, considering that the ball was not half over yet.

As it happened, the minister to whom Lord Dunster wanted to speak did not come after all, so the young man had to leave without achieving his object.

As he sauntered back to his chambers he found himself haunted by the face of the "new beauty," and every word she had spoken seemed to return with extra vividness to his memory. What did it mean? Was he falling in love?

"I believe my heart is caught at last!" he murmured, coming to a full stop under a lamp-post. "I, who have always laughed at men when they have talked of 'love at first sight' have fallen a victim to it myself. Well, she is fair enough to enthrall the coldest heart, and fire the iciest imagination; and if I am fated to be made a fool of I would rather it were for the sake of her lovely eyes than anything else."

After this it was quite natural that he should haunt every place where he thought it likely she was to be found. Every morning he rode in the Row, every afternoon drove in the Park, and spent the evenings going from reception to ball—all for the sake of meeting her.

Once or twice it struck him that she made a point of avoiding him, and certainly she put forth no effort to attract his attention at any time.

Lord Dunster had been rather spoiled, perhaps, and this course of conduct was new to him. He was a rich man, possessed of a fine mansion and estates in the Midlands, and looked upon as one of the greatest catches of the season. Mothers with daughters were always extremely attentive to him, and daughters always smiled and blushed with pleasure when he approached, so that he was quite unaccustomed to having his attentions treated so cavalierly.

Perhaps, if the truth must be told, this coldness on the part of Thekla Marriott only served to increase the interest he felt in her. It certainly did not prevent him from taking every opportunity that presented itself of frequenting her society; and people began to smile when he approached, and to call him her shadow.

"It's no good, Dunster, my boy," his friend Gaston said to him one day. "She is flying at higher game than you. Nothing less than the strawberry leaves will content her."

If this were indeed the case there seemed every probability of her ambition being gratified, for the Duke of Restford was one of the most constant of her adorers, and made no secret of his admiration.

All at once the "new beauty" and her father quitted town, and it was a noticeable fact that the fashionable papers, while chronicling their departure, omitted to say where they had gone.

The reason alleged for so abrupt a flitting was the delicacy of Miss Marriott's health, which required rest and change of air; but this was not altogether accepted as the truth

by those who had seen her the night before she left, and who declared she had never looked more beautiful and blooming.

Lord Dunster failing in his efforts at discovering where she had gone from his friends, went in despair to the house rented by her father, with the intention of questioning the servants; but here he was foiled again, for the house was shut up, and a bill in the window announced that it was to let.

"Well," he said to himself, "I must try and forget her. Absence, as a rule, makes the heart grow colder instead of fonder, and perhaps it will do so in this case."

But it did nothing of the sort, for each day that passed only intensified the love which, like a plant of tropical growth, had sprung into blossom in one single night; and towards the end of July, the Viscount resolved to leave London, and spend a few weeks at Dunster Park, his place in W—shire.

It was a fine old house, grey with time-wrought beauties, and built on the slope of a hill, which was richly wooded, and at the foot of which the river Dun wound its silvery way.

The servants were, for the most part, old ones, who had been in the Dunster family for many years, and had grown gray in their service.

"We are very pleased to see you back, my lord," the old butler said, on the morning after the young nobleman's arrival, when he was seated at his solitary breakfast. "I hope your lordship intends to make a long stay?"

"Well, Browning, I really can't say," Lord Dunster answered; "but if I do not find the place too dull, I shall probably remain over September."

"It is dull," observed Browning, sympathetically. "It's a pity there are no gentlemen's seats near."

"I am not so sure of that," yawned the young man. "One may complain of its isolation, but that constitutes one of the charms of the place nevertheless. By the way, I suppose the old Grange has not found a tenant yet?"

"Yes, my lord, it has! I was going to tell you about it. It caused quite a sensation when we heard that someone had taken it."

"I should think so! What is the tenant's name?"

"That I don't know, my lord, for I haven't seen him, but he hasn't attempted to put the place in repair yet, so I fancy there must be a screw loose somewhere," Browning added, with a knowing wink, a liberty his long service warranted him in taking. "It has struck me that he may be a bankrupt, run away from his creditors, and bent on keeping quiet for awhile."

"Very likely," responded Lord Dunster, who always encouraged the old man to talk, more especially when he was alone at the Park, and felt the loss of someone to speak to.

Perhaps it was owing to the conversation just given, that, when he sauntered out after breakfast, he should take the path across the fields, which led by a short cut to Norton Grange, or as it was more frequently and familiarly called, the "old Grange." The distance was about two miles and a half this way, but by the road it was almost double as far.

It was a very old house, built in the Elizabethan style, and nearly covered with ivy, which had even climbed up to the gables of the roof, and which may have served to increase the air of dampness and gloom that was its pervading characteristic. Round it was a deep moat, filled with stagnant water, and beyond this lay the plantations; where the trees were growing in dank luxuriance, free for many a long year from the touch of pruning knife or trainer.

Lord Dunster knew his way through this plantation, and it was here his curiosity led him on this particular morning, when he braved the peril of being called to account for trespassing.

Never since he was a boy had the place had an occupant, save, indeed, the owls that built in the chimneys, and the rats that scoured through the cellars; and he remembered well the stories he used to hear concerning it—how a man had brought his young wife there, had grown jealous of her, and one day, in an access of passion at her supposed infidelity, had first of all shot her, and then fallen dead at her feet, with a bullet through his own brain.

It was an awful tragedy, and no one was brave enough to take the house after it had been enacted; so for many years it had stood empty, growing daily more desolate, until even the herons took flight from the pool, and the country people believed devoutly that it was haunted by the ghost of the poor young wife who had fallen a victim to her husband's cruel and unfounded suspicions.

No wonder, therefore, that when it was let the news was received with surprise.

"By Jove, it is a dreary hole!" muttered Lord Dunster, as he viewed it from behind a clump of trees; and involuntarily he thought of Hood's lines:—

"O'er all there hung a silence and a fear,
A sense of mystery, the spirit daunted,
And said as plain as whisper in the ear,
The house is haunted!"

At that moment there came a loud barking, and a dog sprang from behind some bushes in rather closer proximity to the young man's calves than he was inclined to think desirable, especially as the animal had evidently some bulldog blood in him, and showed a ferocious muzzle as he stood, snarling and barking at the intruder.

"Be quiet, Joe—lie down!" cried a fresh young voice, at the sound of which Dunster felt the blood suddenly rush to his heart, and a minute later there stood before him no less a person than Theckla Marriott herself.

Her surprise was equal to his own, but she was the first to recover her self-possession, and advanced, holding out her hand.

"How do you do, Lord Dunster? This is an unlooked-for meeting!"

"And—to me—a very great pleasure," he responded, bowing low over the slim white hand. "Are you staying in this neighbourhood, may I ask?"

"I am staying there," pointing with her fingers to the ivy-shrouded house, across the moat.

"At the haunted Grange? Impossible!"

"It is true, nevertheless. My father has taken the place for twelve months."

Lord Dunster stared at her in speechless astonishment.

"You seem very much surprised?" she observed, looking at him curiously.

"I am more than surprised," he answered, with candour. "I am dumbfounded."

"I do not know why you should be," she said, colouring. "There is surely nothing so very strange in our wishing to get away as far into the country as we can."

"Certainly not, but I should have thought this uncanny house would have been the last to strike your fancy. However, perhaps you are ignorant of the reputation it has acquired?"

"You mean as to its being haunted?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" she said, indifferently, "we are proof against ghosts—luckily for ourselves; and indeed, we are inclined to think the legend rather an advantage than otherwise, seeing that it keeps people away."

"Am I to take that as an intimation that I must not call on Mr. Marriott?"

"Yes," she replied, with grave directness.

"We left London because we wished to get away from the noise and tumult of the world, and while we are here we desire the most perfect quiet. Besides, our retinue of servants is so small that it would be impossible for us to entertain."

He bowed without replying, and, after a little more conversation she bade him farewell, and, calling her dog, crossed the moat, and disappeared behind the house.

CHAPTER II.

The more Lord Dunster pondered over the strangeness of Mr. Marriott and his daughter occupying such a dilapidated old place as the haunted Grange the more incomprehensible did it appear. Of course, after what Theckla had said, it would be impossible for him to call there, and yet he by no means intended giving up her acquaintance, for the sight of her beauty had given a fresh impetus to his love, and he resolved, come what might, that he would do his best to win her.

Her father might be an undesirable person, perhaps, but he felt a conviction that she, at least, was pure and good, and worthy to become any man's wife.

As she would not visit anywhere there seemed no prospect of meeting her casually, but she must go for walks occasionally, and so he resolved to watch for her in the plantation, and take the risk of her anger.

For three days he was unsuccessful, and he spent the whole of the morning sitting on the fallen trunk of a tree without any result. Then he resolved to try the afternoon; and at last, his ruse was crowned with success, for Theckla and her dog appeared, crossing the moat, and presently entered the shrubbery.

Dunster did not go to meet her, for he had no desire for their meeting to be witnessed from the house, and if she came to the spot where he was waiting there would be no danger of such a catastrophe.

"You here again!" she exclaimed, stopping short and colouring—he did not know whether it was with anger or confusion.

"Yes, it is I. I hope you are not going to be angry with me for my audacity?"

"Why—oh, why did you come?" she murmured in distress, clasping her hands together.

"Shall I tell you the truth?" he asked, lowering his voice, and taking her hand—keeping it, too, in spite of all her efforts to withdraw it. "I came because I was resolved to see you again. I am not the sort of man to give up an object when I have once resolved upon it, and from the first night I saw you I determined to win you as my wife. I love you, Theckla—love you so dearly, that life without you would be a long misery! Darling! what have you to say to me?"

She said nothing, but just for one moment it seemed to him that she swayed towards him, and her eyes confessed what her tongue would not utter.

The weakness was only momentary, however, for the next instant she drew herself away.

"I cannot listen to such an avowal—you must never speak to me so again!" she exclaimed, in an agitated voice.

"But you have not answered my question, Theckla?"

"I will do so, then, and the answer is a negative. Now, will you leave me?"

"No!" he said, boldly. "Perhaps I have been too hasty in my declarations, but I do not despair, and I refuse to be sent away. If I cannot be your lover I will be your friend. Surely you will not deny me that?"

She did not seem to know how to answer him, and looked round with a pathetic sort of bewilderment, as if she would fain seek for counsel.

She did not say "No!" however; and he, seeing his advantage, at once pursued it.

"All I ask is that you will let me meet you occasionally, and if ever you want anything done that you will come to me. Trust me, Theckla, I will be a sincere friend to you!"

"I accept your offer!" she said, speaking as if on the impulse of a sudden resolution.

"Heaven knows I want a friend badly enough. But you will not attempt to visit the house?"

"No!—that is, if I may reckon on seeing you here sometimes!"

"I come out every afternoon when it is fine!" she returned. And so the compact was made, and each afternoon they saw each other, and walked together through the leafy woods

that stretched between the plantation and Dunster Park.

Several times he asked her to come over and look through the picture-gallery at the house, but this she declined.

The fact was, she seemed to have an almost morbid dread of seeing anyone, and often the young Viscount thought how changed she was from the brilliant belle of a few weeks ago!

As he got to know her better he was more than ever struck with the vein of deep sadness that seemed to run through her life, and which yet appeared to be unnatural to her disposition.

Of all things save those which concerned herself she was ready to take a cheerful view, but the contemplation of her own destiny invariably filled her with melancholy.

Thus two or three weeks passed away, and the fact of their meetings remained unknown to anyone but themselves. No word of love had been spoken between them, but Dunster could see that she was growing to depend upon him more and more, and the glad blushes leapt to her cheek every time she saw him.

As for him, that one hour in the day ceased to content him, and often he would stroll over to the plantation after dinner, trusting to the darkness to conceal him, and satisfied if he caught a glimpse of a shadow on the blind of the window which he knew to be hers.

One night he was there rather later than usual. In point of fact, it was after midnight, but he had felt restless and fidgety that evening, and knew it would be impossible to sleep, even if he went to bed.

He had no hope of seeing the shadow on the blind, as probably Theckla would have retired to rest; but for all that, it would be a satisfaction for him to watch the casket in which his beautiful treasure was enshrined.

All was very quiet round the old Grange—not a light twinkled from the windows, and not even an ivy leaf moved. There was no moon, and the faint light of the stars was only just sufficient to show the outline of objects on which it fell.

Suddenly the figure of a man issued from a side door, and with noiseless footsteps proceeded to reconnoitre. He went all round the house, pausing now and again to look about, as if to make sure there were no intruders near; then he came back to the bridge, and let loose a dog, who crossed it, and dashed immediately into the plantation.

Just for a minute Dunster felt a little qualmish, but as the animal approached he said, in a low tone,—

"Joe—Joe!"

The dog, which was the same Theckla frequently brought with her, had by this time got to know the young man, and therefore took no notice of his presence, but went scouring through the plantation, and at length returned over the bridge to the man who had despatched him, and who had been standing motionless all this time, apparently waiting for the result of the animal's search.

Evidently the latter had been sent for the purpose of skirmishing, and making sure there was no one about.

After the animal had recrossed the bridge the man went indoors, and a few minutes elapsed without anything occurring; then the door again opened, and three men issued forth, carrying a long, dark object, which seemed to be of considerable weight, for they stopped two or three times to put it down and rest, even in the short distance from the house to the moat.

Dunster, as much interested as mystified, watched these proceedings from his covert vantage in the plantation, himself well screened from view by the bushes, behind which he was standing.

Arrived at the moat, the men put their burden down, and proceeded to adjust some ropes round it; after which, they—not without a good deal of difficulty—lowered it into the water, and then, as quietly as they had come out, returned to the house.

Lord Dunster waited for an hour or two longer, but saw nothing more, and then went home, very much puzzled by what he had witnessed.

What could be the contents of that long, heavy box, that they had evidently been so anxious to get rid of? Was Mr. Marriott one of the trio, who had helped to carry it? The young man fancied he had recognised him, but he was too far away, and the light was too dim for him to feel any certainty on the subject. Still the episode made him uncomfortable, and increased the mistrust he had for some time entertained towards Theckla's father.

Should he tell the girl what he had seen? No; he decided that to do so would only render her uncomfortable without doing any good. Besides, the affair might be capable of a perfectly natural and common-place solution, mysterious as it seemed when viewed from the outside.

The next morning he received a letter which caused him a good deal of anxiety, and when Theckla met him in the afternoon she said, quickly,—

"What is the matter? You look quite pale and woe-begone?"

"Do I? I have had very little sleep during the night; and, besides, I am worried."

She looked up with quick inquiry, but instead of answering the question her eyes asked he said abruptly,—

"Did you sleep well last night?"

"Very well indeed."

"And were not disturbed by anything?"

"No."

"What time did you go to bed?"

"At my usual hour—eleven. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," he answered with a nervous laugh. "Perhaps I thought that, as I did not sleep myself, there might have been something in the air, inimical to slumber."

"As a matter of fact I slept much sounder than usual," she avowed, "for I drank a glass of wine before I went upstairs, and that is a thing I very rarely do."

"What made you do so last night?"

"Well, my father had just had a bottle of champagne opened, and he insisted on my tasting it."

"But I thought you told me a few days ago that your father was from home, and that you did not expect him back for a week?"

"That is true. He came back, however, last night quite unexpectedly."

"And is at home now?"

"Yes."

Dunster was silent for a few minutes.

"Theckla!" he said, at length—he had gradually dropped into the habit of calling her by her Christian name. "Do you not think that your hurried departure from town, and burying yourself alive in this most dreary place, was calculated to arouse suspicions in the minds of your friends?"

"I have no friends," she returned, a little drearily.

"Of your acquaintances, then?"

She looked at him with startled, widely-opened eyes.

"What kind of suspicions do you mean?"

"I mean with regard to your father—I cannot mention anything specific—but people must have thought things were not quite as they ought to be; that perhaps he was in debt, or something of that sort. I know you will not mind my saying this, for you must be sure that I care for you too well to wish to wound you."

"No doubt what you say is quite right," she said, slowly. "But the real reason why we left in such haste was that the Duke of Restford had made me an offer of marriage which I declared my intention of refusing. My father, however, was so angry, that he wrote to the duke himself, saying I must take time to deliberate over my answer, or something to that effect, and then he brought me away lest I should see the duke and tell him the truth."

"Then you were not tempted by the prospect of becoming a duchess?"

She turned upon him a look of such proud reproach that he felt ashamed of the question.

"Forgive me, Theckla! I ought to have known better than ask you. Now I will tell you the reason why I look so miserable—I shall have to go away."

"Go away!" she echoed, while all the sweet carmine faded from her cheeks. Then she turned away her eyes, so that he should not see their expression, and added, "When must you go?"

"To-morrow morning, by the first train. I will explain to you the reason why. I have often been on the point of telling you the story. You remember asking me if I had a brother?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is on account of him that my departure is necessary. His name is Hubert Thelluson, and he is a couple of years younger than I am. Some six months ago he went abroad, and at first I heard from him pretty regularly; then his letters suddenly ceased, and although I wrote and told him I was growing anxious about him I could not obtain any reply. At that time I was in India but I came home to Europe for the purpose of trying to see him, and amongst other places went to Vienna, where he had been when he last wrote to me. I inquired at his hotel, but discovered nothing beyond the fact that he went out one day, did not return, and the next morning sent someone to pay his bill, and fetch away his luggage. Since then all traces of him seem to be lost, and although I have employed detectives, and I think they have done their utmost, the mystery still remains unsolved."

"The very night I came to England from Vienna I went to Lady Edmond's ball in order to see the Austrian Ambassador, who I expected would be there. Since then I have only prosecuted my inquiries through agents and detectives, as they all advised me not to interfere personally in the matter. One of the men, however, who has been in Vienna, wrote to me this morning, saying he should be in London to-morrow, and asking me to meet him there, so I am in hopes that he may have news for me."

Theckla had listened to the story very quietly, and with apparent attention, nay, more than attention, for her face had grown white to the lips, and she sat down on the prone trunk of the tree that was their rendezvous, and did not raise her eyes even when he finished speaking.

"What do you think has happened to your brother?" she said at last, in very low tones.

"I do not know what to think," the Viscount responded, gloomily. "Sometimes I fear that he has been robbed and murdered, sometimes that he has become mixed up with some political quarrel, and dare not show himself until it has blown over, for his political principles have always been a source of anxiety to me, and I have many times feared they would drag him into some scrape or another. He was a socialist—a democrat, I may say."

"Some accident may have happened to him," faltered Theckla.

"I do not think so, for if that had been the case his luggage would not have been sent for to the hotel. No, I have hoped against hope all this long time, but now I am beginning to fear the worst."

He was very depressed, and not even her presence had power to cheer him. As a matter of fact, Theckla herself seemed exceedingly dispirited, and in a few minutes rose to go. As she was saying good-bye he kept hold of her hand.

"I shall see you here on my return from town?" he said, interrogatively.

"Oh, yes, I think so. When shall you be back?"

"The day after to-morrow, probably."

"Then I will be here in the afternoon,"

she said, withdrawing her hand, and hurrying away in a sort of feverish haste that struck him as strange.

That same night he was in town, and the next morning, as he was sitting in his rooms in Piccadilly, the person he was expecting was announced.

"Mr. Pilchard, please, my lord!" the servant said, as she opened the door; and there walked in a short, slim, dapper little man, clean shaven, and with that class of physiognomy one has come to associate with actors.

"Good morning, my lord. I hope I see you well?" he observed, with a low bow before he seated himself. "Your lordship received my letter, I presume?"

"Yes, and as you see, obeyed its summons. I am all anxiety to hear what you have to tell me with regard to my brother."

"Very good. We will proceed to business at once."

The detective drew his chair close to the table, and took from his pocket a memorandum book, which he opened and consulted.

"The last letter you received from your brother was on January the twenty-fourth?"

"It was."

"And you have heard nothing of him since?"

"No—or at least nothing but what I have learned from you regarding his departure from the hotel. I have been hoping, however, that you would be able to furnish me with information."

"I have not been idle, my lord," was the quick retort, "but Vienna is a large city, and the clue to guide me a mere nothing. However, I have succeeded in discovering something, and I hope it may lead to more. I found from a waiter at the hotel that your brother was in the habit of going out every evening at the same time, and in the same direction, usually returning after midnight. On these occasions he did not wear dress clothes, so it is clear he was not at fashionable assemblies, or associating with people in his own rank of life. The hypothesis that remains is either that he was at a gambling hell, or at the meetings of some secret society."

"Hubert was not a gambler," put in Lord Dunster, hastily.

"But he mixed himself up in politics?"

"Yes. Still he was not a Nihilist either. He wanted reforms, but he was not the sort of man to do evil that good might come."

"We are often led into evil without knowing it," observed Pilchard, sententially. "Now, in the midst of my peregrinations, I discovered a house that had been somewhat of a puzzle to the people living near. It was situated in a very quiet neighbourhood, and no one was ever seen issuing from it in the daytime, but at night many visitors came and went, and yet there was never any noise. These visitors, for the most part, wore costumes that were rather suggestive of a desire for secrecy; that is to say, they often had on felt hats which were pulled over their faces so as to disguise their features, and large cloaks or overcoats that performed the same office for their figures."

"From whom did you learn this?" asked the Viscount.

"From the daughter of a shopkeeper near, whose curiosity had been aroused, and who kept a watch on the place."

"But what had this to do with my brother?"

"I am coming to that part of the history. It seems that, one evening, this girl saw a young man going along, whom she had often seen before, and from whose dress there fell a gold button or stud. She picked it up, and went after him, but he had disappeared within the house, and although she rang and knocked loudly for some time she could not get an answer. This was late in January, and she never saw this young man again. I bought the stud from her on the chance of your recognizing it, and here it is."

He took it from his pocket-book, carefully unwrapped the silver paper in which it was folded, and handed it to the young man.

It was plain gold, engraved in tiny discs, rather a peculiar pattern, and Dunster started violently as he saw it.

"Can you identify it?" asked the detective, who was watching him closely.

"Yes, it is poor Hubert's, or, at least, he had some like it, for he designed the pattern himself."

"Then," said Pilchard, with a certain amount of satisfaction, "I think we have proved that it's owner must have been your brother!"

"But about the house!" exclaimed Dunster, impatiently. "Did you not make inquiries, then?"

"I did more, for I obtained permission to search it. The result, however, was not encouraging, for it was empty, save of some dingy and much dilapidated furniture. I then applied to the landlord, who said he had let it for six months, furnished, to a man who paid him the rent in advance, but of this man he knew nothing save that he was an American, and his name was Pullen."

"Then," said the Viscount, steadying his voice by an effort, "what is your opinion on the subject? Do you think my brother was murdered?"

"That I cannot say, but certainly that house had something to do with his disappearance. I was going to tell you it had very extensive cellars underneath, and in them a trap door, at the bottom of which was a pit or well."

"Good heavens!" cried Dunster, with a horror that was purely involuntary. Then after a moment's pause, he added, in an agitated voice, "These people could not have disappeared without a conveyance, without horses! Did you not inquire at the livery stables if they had not hired an equipage?"

Pilchard smiled with a slight contempt.

"Certainly I did, my lord, but if this Pullen wanted to conceal his identity he would have a dozen ways of doing it. For example, the party would divide, or would be disguised."

"But if they were taking my brother away against his will, why did he not call for assistance while travelling?"

"Why indeed?" said the detective, gravely. "That is one of the reasons that makes me fear he never left Vienna; and now I have put the case before you, I want to know whether you think it worth while for me to go on with the inquiries."

"By all means continue!" exclaimed the Viscount, hastily. "If the poor fellow really has met with foul play nothing shall induce me to rest until his murderer has been brought to justice. Make every inquiry you can, and apply to me when you want money. In the meantime, let me provide you with some for your present necessities."

He wrote a cheque for a hundred pounds, and after taking it Pilchard wished him good morning and took leave, while Dunster paced the room in a state of uncontrollable agitation.

He had been very fond of his brother, and the thought that he had met his death by foul play—while it stirred him with horror—roused in his soul a keen desire for vengeance, and he determined to consecrate his life to the task of finding out the truth; and then, if his suspicions were verified, meting out a terrible punishment.

CHAPTER III.

AMONG a good deal of thought Dunster determined to go to Vienna himself, but first of all he must return to the country, and arrange matters with a view to his absence. Then he wanted to see Theckla, tell her all Pilchard had related, and wish her good-bye before starting.

Accordingly, the next afternoon he was at the old place, but when the appointed time came, it did not bring Theckla with it; and as three hours passed away, and she had not yet

appeared, he began to fear something must have happened.

He did not go away, however; for so long as it was light there was still a chance of her coming, and it was better waiting for her there, and having in view the roof that sheltered her, than waiting at home in the loneliness of his own grand house.

It was not a pleasant afternoon, a thunderous closeness filled the air, and the clouds hung low, and were heavy and leaden. There was a storm brooding, and it threatened to be very violent when it broke.

Seven o'clock came, and just as Dunster was getting up in order to go away a light footstep crushed the fallen leaves, and Theckla stood before him, so pale and heavy-eyed that the flattering idea that she had been lamenting his absence at once flashed across him, and made him infuse more warmth than usual into his manner as he took her hand.

"Oh!" she said, with a long drawn sigh of relief, "I feared you would have grown tired of waiting!"

"I should never be tired of waiting if the prospect of seeing you at last remained to me," he answered, tenderly.

She did not seem to notice the compliment, or if she did she did not rebuke it.

"When did you come from London?" she asked, in a quick nervous manner.

"This morning."

"And—and have you discovered anything?"

He gave her details of the conversation that had taken place between himself and the detective, and apparently the recital caused her great agitation, for she was trembling violently as he concluded.

"You are too sensitive to listen to such stories," he said, with affectionate anxiety. "I ought not to have told you this."

"But I wanted to know. I wanted to know everything," was her quick response, and then for some time she remained silent, her eyes fixed on the ground.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked at length.

"Devote myself to the task of solving the mystery," he returned promptly. "People who disappear in this nineteenth century of ours ought to be traced without much difficulty, and I will never rest until my efforts are rewarded with success."

"You will go abroad, I suppose?"

"Yes, to Vienna, which means that I must say good-bye to you. I hope it will not be for long."

"It will be for ever," she said, with a strange calmness of conviction. "I shall never see you again."

"If I thought that, I should be tempted not to go."

"And neglect your duty?"

"Your rebuke is right. No, nothing should induce me to do that. I wonder," he continued, looking at her fixedly; "whether this farewell means half as much to you as it does to me."

She met his gaze freely, but drew a sharp breath, as if she were suffering.

"Yes," she said slowly. "You shall hear the truth now that you are leaving. It does pain me to think that I shall never see you more—pains me more than I can say."

He took her hands in his, and drew her close to him.

"Then, Theckla, you love me?"

"I love you," she repeated after him. Their lips met in a close, clinging kiss, but a moment after she had withdrawn herself from his embrace, and stood a little distance away.

"You tell me you love me!" she said, in a nervous, hurried, voice, "and I believe you, but all the same I should like to test the truth of your words."

"Test it in any way you will; I am sure you will not find me wanting."

"Will you then, grant the request I am about making?"

"You must let me hear what it is, first."

"You will not promise without hearing?"

"Hardly," he said, with a smile. "You might ask me for the moon, you see, and then where would my promise be?"

She made a quick movement of impatience.

"I am not likely to jest with you at such a moment as this. Your faith in me cannot be quite perfect, or you would trust me more. However, I want you to," she spoke very slowly, so that each word might tell, "I want you to give up this search after your brother."

"What?" he exclaimed, in the utmost surprise.

She repeated her request, in the same deliberate manner.

"My dearest Theckla, you cannot be aware of what you are saying! Why, you yourself reminded me a minute ago that it was my duty to continue it."

"I know I did, but then I had not confessed my love, and therefore had no claim on you. Now,"—a lovely blush spread itself over her cheeks—"it is different."

"But what reason have you for making such a demand?"

"Simply this; that you are liable to fall into danger, for you may be sure that the people at whose hands your brother came to harm will not be likely to spare you."

He drew her to him, in spite of her resistance, and kissed her over and over again.

"I am more than grateful for your thinking so much of my safety," he said, tenderly, "but, all the same, I cannot accede to your wishes."

"Why not?" sharply.

For answer he repeated the lines,—

"I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more."

"Then," she said, her face growing very pale, and the strained look he had seen before coming again into her eyes, "you put upon me the humiliation of a refusal after I have lowered my pride in asking you a favour."

"Theckla!" he exclaimed, his brows contracting, "surely you are not one of those unreasonable women who are angry if they cannot have everything they want, and utterly refuse to be convinced by argument? If I were to agree to your demand, I tell you you would despise me as much as I should despise myself. Ask me anything else, tell me to risk my life in getting you a flower even, and you shall not find me backward, but do not try to turn me from what you, as well as I, know to be my duty."

Her eyelids drooped, and for a few moments a sculptor might have taken her as a model for despondency. Then she raised her head, and looked at him steadily. Apparently the result of her scrutiny was discouraging, for she sighed deeply.

"At least," she said, you will do this much.

"Consent not to begin your inquiries for another week? Surely that is little enough to ask!"

"Perhaps so, and I agree to it, while at the same time I confess I ought not to do so," he replied, frankly. "In return for this concession you must let me see you longer each day than I am here."

She did not seem to hear the last part of his sentence, but made a quick gesture of farewell, and without another word or look ran across the drawbridge and into the house, leaving Dunster amazed at the suddenness of her disappearance.

He waited some time, thinking perhaps she might return, but she did not; and presently, the storm that had been threatening for so long, burst, and Dunster drew farther back into the plantation in order to obtain shelter.

A few minutes later he heard the sound of quick footsteps over the dead leaves, and on looking up beheld no less a person than Mr. Marriott standing before him.

"This is a surprise!" said the latter, holding out his hand. "I did not know you had left town, although I was aware you had a seat near here!"

Dunster was conscious of a strong sense of repugnance to this man, with his olive skin

and cold, dark eyes—a repugnance so strong that he had some difficulty in concealing it sufficiently to make his greeting conventional.

"I left London this morning," he said, "and I return again to-morrow. By the way, may I beg your hospitality until the storm clears? I am getting wet through."

"Certainly," returned Marriott; but his words came after a perceptible pause. "I am afraid," he added, with a grim laugh, "you will not think much of the shelter I am enabled to afford, for my roof is hardly waterproof—a picturesque fact when viewed from the outside, but uncomfortable for those within."

He led the way across the bridge, but when he came to the door, instead of entering as Theckla had done he pulled the rusty handle of the hanging bell, which resulted in a peal that was sent back in hollow echoes from within.

It was some time before it was answered, and then a man of middle age, dressed quietly in black, let them in, looking with some slight surprise at the Viscount, as if a visitor were a sort of *rara avis*.

Marriott led the way into a long, lofty room, of which the furniture was old and moth-eaten, but which, thanks to a fire blazing in the grate, presented a much less uncomfortable appearance than might have been expected. It is true some attempts to hide the dilapidated state of the room had been made—a tiger-skin was thrown over the couch, some Eastern rugs concealed the shabbiness of the carpet, and an easy chair of modern manufacture had been imported, and was drawn close up to the fireplace.

"Rather early for a fire, isn't it?" said Marriott, offering his guest the arm-chair. "But this house is damp, and even in summer does not labour under the disadvantage of being too hot!"

"I should think not!" exclaimed the young man. "I must confess I was very much astonished when I heard you had taken such a god-forsaken place!"

Marriott flashed upon him a sharp glance of suspicious inquiry.

"Who told you I had taken it?" he asked, quickly.

"I saw you go in once from the plantation!" Dunster replied, with some slight embarrassment, for he was unaware whether Mr. Marriott knew anything of his meetings with his daughter, and did not, therefore, care to give Theckla as his informant.

He looked about to see if he could discover any sign of her presence in the room, but there were none—no flowers, no books, no work basket, or music.

"Is this where you generally sit?" he asked his host.

"Yes!"

Then it was clear that Theckla did not often favour her father with her company!

Mr. Marriott, apologising to his guest for his absence, left the room for a few minutes, and when he returned sat down on the opposite side of the fire, and began to talk on indifferent topics until the same domestic who had let them in appeared with a tablecloth. He proceeded to set on the table a plentiful—nay, epicurean repast, and brought up some bottles of choice wines.

"I must really apologise for intruding upon you thus unceremoniously!" said Dunster, who, however, was keenly enough interested in the household to feel under great obligations to the storm—which still raged with unabated fury—for giving him this chance of studying it.

He did fall justice to the meal, and after it was finished, and he and Marriott were lingering over their cigars, it happened that the conversation turned on tiger-hunting, and Dunster got up in order to examine the rug before alluded to.

"This is a fine skin!" he observed, regarding it with admiration. "I suppose you did not shoot the animal yourself?"

"No; but a friend of mine did, and gave me the skin!" returned Marriott. "Come!

let me give you another glass of Madeira!" he added, suiting the action to the word. "I can strongly recommend this wine!"

Dunster did not respond to this invitation; he was looking at the skin with great attention—examining it inside and out.

"Do you know," he said presently, with a puzzled air, "I could almost swear I had seen this rug before!—nay, that I shot the very animal from which it was taken myself? It is strange!"

"More than strange—absurd!" gruffly responded his host. "It is not likely that I should have in my possession the skin of a tiger which you shot?"

"And yet it is true."—Dunster came over with the rug in his hand.—"See—here is the slit made by my knife in his throat, and if I were to turn up my coat-sleeve I could show you the marks he made on my arm. That was a struggle I am not likely to forget, for I was within an ace of getting killed myself. I shot the animal—as I believed—dead, but on coming close to him I found my mistake—and it was a good thing for me I happened to have my knife in my hand. You see the skin is a particularly large one, and has some peculiar marks upon it, so that I have no difficulty in identifying it, more especially as in this corner are my punctured initials!"

It was quite true. Invisible, except to the closest examination, the initials "E. D." (Ernest Dunster) were yet distinctly to be seen.

Marriott seemed somewhat taken aback by the discovery, and his brow grew gloomy.

"If the rug is yours, pray take it," he said at length. "I cannot conceive, though, how it got into my friend's possession, supposing your suspicions to be correct."

"Do you mind telling me the name of your friend?"

"Certainly I do!" retorted Marriott, angrily. "I will not allow myself to be questioned and cross-questioned by anybody."

"I beg your pardon—I had not the slightest intention of cross-questioning you. I suppose," he added courteously, as he put the rug back in its former position, "I must have been mistaken. I gave the skin of which I speak to my brother Hubert, and it is extremely unlikely that he would have parted with it."

"And who may your brother Hubert be?" asked Marriott, unconcernedly.

Dunster, in reply, told him of Hubert's strange disappearance, and his own efforts to solve the mystery surrounding it.

Marriott listened attentively, and shrugged his shoulders as the young man ceased speaking.

"Better leave the matter where it is," he observed, significantly. "It's no use stirring dirty water, you know. I daresay your brother got mixed up with bad company, or something of that kind. Hundreds of people disappear annually in Europe, and no clue is ever discovered to their whereabouts."

"Other people don't concern me, but my brother's case is not a parallel one," responded the Viscount. "For I shall never be satisfied until I have brought his murderer to justice!"

Marriott was a moderate drinker himself, but he did his best to make his guest empty the bottle, and it required all Dunster's firmness to prevent himself from being forced into imbibing more than was good for him.

In order to resist his host's persuasions he got up and went to the window, lifting up the blind so as to be able to look out into the night.

"It still rains heavily," he said, as the result of his observation.

Mr. Marriott made no remark, and after a slight pause, Dunster added,—

"Would you think me presuming on your kindness if I asked you for a bed? It is so dark that I really fear I shouldn't be able to find my way back to-night."

"My dear fellow, you would be most welcome to a bed, but it so happens that we have

not a spare one in the house. We only furnished the rooms we knew we should occupy."

"Oh!" rejoined Dunster, with a slight laugh, "I should have couched my request in different words, for by a 'bed' I simply mean shelter. I can rest most comfortably on that couch, for example."

"Then do so, by all means. I'm afraid however, you won't find it very comfortable, in spite of your stoicism."

It was not a particularly cordial invitation, but Dunster cared little for that. He was anxious to stay at the Grange as long as he could, for although not probable, it was nevertheless just possible that he might see or hear something which would throw light on its master's motives for coming there.

After some more conversation, Marriott again excused himself, and during his absence a servant brought in a tray on which were lemons, sugar, and a spirit-stand. Hardly had he departed before a white hand was thrust through the open door, and a tiny note fell at Dunster's feet.

Opening it, he found it contained but a couple of lines, in handwriting that he believed to be Theckla's.

"Do not drink anything more to night, but if you are pressed have the glass filled, and say you will finish it just before going to sleep."

He had only just time to master the sense of these lines when his host returned, and proceeded to brew some punch, which he told Dunster he would find particularly good.

The latter could not with politeness refuse to taste it, but having done so, he said, with an appearance of candour,—

"The fact is, I have drunk so much Madeira that I don't care to mix the two just yet. Will you let me keep the punch until just before I lie down?"

Marriott, of course, assented, and before long bade Dunster good-night, having first provided him with a couple of cushions and an extra rug.

As soon as he had left the room the young man emptied the contents of the glass into a large china bowl, and then threw himself on the couch, and began to think over the events of the evening.

He was quite convinced that this tiger-skin was the identical one he had given to his brother, and then the question arose,—How did it come into Marriott's possession?

He said a friend had given it him; but his manner did not tend to convince Dunster of his veracity, and his refusal to mention the name of the friend was suspicious, to say the least.

Dunster had no doubt whatever that the punch was drugged, and that Theckla, for this reason, had desired to prevent his drinking it. But what motive could Marriott have for desiring to make him sleep?

CHAPTER IV.

It need hardly be said that Dunster did his best to keep awake, and lay for a couple of hours quite still, and listening with ears keenly on the alert for any abnormal sound that might break the silence.

All was very quiet—even the rain had ceased, and the only interruption to the night silence was the weird shriek of an owl now and again, as he flew through the darkness in search of prey.

It must be remembered that Dunster had journeyed from London that day, and had been for two or three nights without his proper amount of sleep, so that it is hardly surprising that he should have been unable to keep another vigil, and should allow himself to be overcome by fatigue, and drop into an uneasy slumber, soon after the striking of the clock warned him that it was two hours past midnight.

He awoke suddenly with the impression

that a ray of light had just fallen across his face. As he opened his eyes, however, he found the room was in total darkness; but with an instinct of caution, that proved well founded, he did not stir.

A minute later, and a slide was pushed aside from a dark lantern, thus proving that someone was in the apartment besides himself.

Who it was he did not see just then, for thinking he had better feign sleep, he again closed his eyes.

The holder of the lantern drew near, bent over him, and, apparently assured that he was asleep, put down the lantern, and gently took the memorandum-book and other contents out of his pocket; then drawing a chair up to the table, looked hastily through them, after which he quietly restored them to their owner and left the room.

No sooner had he gone—of course the nocturnal intruder was none other than Marriott—than the Viscount sprang up, and with noiseless footsteps followed him along the corridor, keeping, however, at a pretty respectful distance, so that his presence should not be suspected.

At the end of the passage Marriott paused, and tapped gently at a door, which was immediately opened by the servant who had acted as butler.

"Is he all right?" asked the butler.

"Yes! and, as far as I can make out, suspects nothing!" returned Marriott. "We can send the things away after all!"

They both went down some stone steps, and then it became evident that the basement part of the old Grange was pretty extensive; for a long, stone corridor gave access to a couple of large, though low, rooms, in which three men were hard at work packing various boxes. The silence and celerity with which they did it were something marvellous; and Dunster, who had paused at the door, and was now peering in between the cracks, wondered greatly what the contents of the small, but seemingly heavy, packages could be.

Marriott himself helped in the packing, and strange to say, hardly a word was spoken; indeed, they all seemed too busy for the exchange of commonplaces.

"I suppose," observed one of the men, at last, addressing Marriott, "we may be sure the coast is clear?"

"Oh, yes—quite sure. My visitor is firmly asleep, thanks to the opiate I mixed with his whisky, and there is no one else likely to be on the watch."

A little later, the speaker desisted from his employment, and saying something in a voice too low for Dunster to overhear, came towards the door, upon which the latter swiftly retreated upstairs again, and returned to his couch.

He was far from being a coward, but he saw clearly enough that if Marriott suspected him of spying he would stand no chance, unarmed as he was, against four strong men, who were doubtless well provided with weapons.

The mystery was thickening, and the Viscount's heart fell, as he reflected on the share that the woman he loved might have in it.

It was not a pleasant position—sitting there in the dark, waiting for he knew not what, and tormented the while by a hundred suspicions too dim and vague to put into words. At last the strain grew too great to be borne, and he got up and went to the window.

It was not very light, although by this time the moon had risen; nevertheless, the outlines of a carriage and pair of horses were dimly visible standing in front of the house, and even as he looked the door opened, and Marriott came forth, half carrying, half dragging a figure wrapped from head to foot in a long black cloak.

Dunster did not stay to reason, but impressed with the idea that this must be Theckla, and resolved to discover whether any force was being used towards her, he threw open the sash of the window, and sprang to

the ground—a distance of nearly twenty feet.

At the same instant a piercing shriek, uttered in a woman's voice, broke on the silence of the night; and Marriott, recovering from the surprise into which this unexpected movement had thrown him, loosed his hold on the figure he was supporting, and, springing forward, caught Dunster in his arms.

"What is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed, in a low, hoarse voice.

"It means that if you are a respectable man, and wish to prove yourself so, you will give some account of these mysterious proceedings," replied Dunster, loudly. "Who is that you are taking away under cover of the night? What are the contents of the box you dropped into the moat a few days ago?"

Marriott started violently; evidently the charge took him by surprise.

"What has that to do with you?" he demanded.

"This much—I am a magistrate, and it is my duty to see that the laws of the country are not set at defiance!"

"Very bold—very conscientious, no doubt," sneered the elder man. "Look you, my lord, this is no time for trifling. You have taken me by surprise, I confess; but remember, I hold your life in my hands, and unless you swear by all you hold sacred—unless you give me your word of honour as a gentleman to reveal nothing of what you have seen, I do not hold myself responsible for anything that may befall you."

"Do you think I am to be bribed or threatened into silence?" demanded Lord Dunster whose hot blood was all on fire. "I decline, to give the required promise!"

As he spoke he made a great effort to free himself from Marriott's grasp and get away.

The latter was a strong man, but he was older than his opponent, and at the best of times less skilful in the art of self-defence, so that if the struggle had been left to the two it would certainly have terminated in Dunster's favour.

But it was not so left, for the servant before alluded to appeared at the door, and was just able to distinguish the forms of the two men, looked together in a deadly embrace. Another moment, and Dunster was conscious of a heavy blow, apparently inflicted by a stick or some other blunt instrument on his forehead. He reeled backwards, a sudden dizziness assailing him, and then—the rest was a blank.

When Dunster came to himself the cold grey dawn was stealing in through the window, and, looking round, he found himself in the sitting-room where he had gone to sleep the preceding night.

He felt dazed and giddy, and there was a pain in his head. He put his hand to the spot, and found the blood from the wound had congealed round it. If it had not been for this he might have fancied the events in which he had taken part had been nothing but the result of a disordered imagination, upset by the quantity of wine he had drunk; and, indeed, as it was, he gazed round in bewilderment, half inclined to wonder whether he had not been the victim of an hallucination of some kind.

As he did so he became aware of a sickly smell emanating from a handkerchief that had dropped down beside him, and which had evidently been dipped in some narcotic—chloroform probably—and placed over his nostrils, with the purpose of inducing unconsciousness.

The handkerchief was a small one, made of the most delicate cambric, and even the chloroform was not strong enough to entirely conceal the subtle perfume of some scent that Theckla was in the habit of using. Evidently the handkerchief was hers, but surely she had not been a party to the use to which it had been put.

Making an effort to steady himself the young man rose and went to the window, and

there, to his extreme astonishment, the first object upon which his eyes rested was nothing more nor less than the upturned face of the detective Pilchard, who was regarding him with the utmost interest, not unmixed with surprise.

"Why, what brings you here?" he exclaimed.

"I was about asking your lordship the same question," retorted the detective. "Can you come out to me, or shall I come in to you?"

Dunster measured the distance from the window—he had jumped it last night, but he was afraid to attempt it now, and he did not know whether it would be safe to venture through the passage in his present weak condition.

"Can you contrive to climb up here?" he said, in answer to Pilchard's question, and almost before the words were uttered the detective, who was light and active as a boy, had scaled the wall, and swung himself lightly in through the window.

"Not so difficult when you are as used to it as I am!" he observed, coolly. "I daresay your lordship is surprised to see me here, but I received news yesterday afternoon which made me take the last down train in order to be at once in communication with you, and at the same time to keep a watch on this house. Perhaps you will tell me all you know about the place?"

Dunster was on the point of doing so when it struck him that he could not mention his suspicions of Theckla's father openly, lest harm should come to the girl herself.

"I think you had better tell me what you know first," he answered evasively, in order to gain time.

Pilchard flashed upon him a quick glance that was rather more piercing than he could have desired at that moment.

"As you will, my lord. Well, then, you will remember that I left one of my comrades in Vienna, on the look-out for information—or rather, for the chance of it, for I did not in the least think it likely he would obtain it. I was wrong, as the event has proved. He kept a sharp look-out on the house I spoke of to you; and one night, as he was passing, noticed a gleam of light in one of the windows. It vanished instantly, and he concluded that a match must have been struck and then blown out immediately. Now, this proved there was someone in the house—possibly a tramp, who, finding it empty, had effected an entrance for the purpose of shelter during the night, or it might be someone connected with the former occupier. My comrade immediately signalled to a soldier who was passing, and told him to watch the front of the house while he himself went to the back, and there let himself in. He was well armed, and therefore not afraid of an encounter, while the reward he knew he should obtain, in case of success, made the risk worth his while. Well, he finally watched the man go downstairs to the cellar, which I told you I had discovered, and there he lifted the trapdoor and let down some steps, which it seems were fastened up underneath the floor. These he descended and remained down for some time, at last returning with a waterproof bag in his hand, which had evidently been hidden there for fear of detection. Of course it behoved my friend to take possession of that bag, and as the man was stooping to put down the trapdoor, he neatly clapped the handcuffs over his wrists, and thus had him at his mercy."

"Well," exclaimed Dunster, in strong excitement, as the detective ceased speaking, "what were the contents of the bag?"

"They consisted of very valuable jewels, and still more valuable documents," returned the detective, with a deliberation that seemed to say he fully appreciated the importance of what he was communicating, and determined to make the most of it. "The documents referred to the plans and movements of a notorious gang of sharpers, the head of which

had long managed to evade detection. No one knew who he was or anything about him, except that his coolness and abilities were of a very extraordinary nature. He has manufactured more counterfeit coin, directed more extensive robberies, and eluded detection more cleverly than any man in Europe or America."

"What is his name?" asked Dunster, whose very lips had blanched.

The detective laughed.

"As to his real name it would be quite impossible for me to tell you, and no doubt his aliases are without count."

"But the man you caught in Vienna, did he not make a confession?"

"He make a confession! Why, he would have cut his tongue out first. He must have been one of the secondary leaders of the gang to have been entrusted with so delicate and confidential a mission as regaining those papers, and when he found he was caught he preserved a complete silence, which he has not yet broken. My idea is that the captain had to leave Vienna in a great hurry, and was afraid of taking the documents with him lest he might be stopped, and the papers discovered. On the person of the man at Vienna they found an address in cipher, which however, they contrived to read, and that address was to the very house in which we are both standing at this present moment."

It was some few seconds before Dunster recovered sufficient presence of mind to go on with his questions.

"Then," he said at last. "You think the leader of this gang of which you speak is at the Grange now?"

"I have every reason to believe so."

"But if this is the case, are you not giving him chances of escape while you are talking to me?"

Again the detective smiled, and at the same moment drew forth a brace of small revolvers from a case in his pocket, and carefully examined them.

"I brought half a dozen men down with me, and they are stationed round the house to stop anyone who may attempt to leave it," he replied, quietly. "Nevertheless, I think it is time my search began. I only thought I would stay to hear anything you might have to tell me with regard to the inmates of the Grange."

"I will defer my communications until a future opportunity," said Dunster, hastily.

"Of course that is at your own discretion, my lord," observed the detective, with a slightly offended air. "There is one point I omitted to state, and it is, that in the bag were found a memorandum-book and some other papers, which had evidently belonged to your brother, so that the secret of his disappearance is thus bound up with the man of whom we are now in search."

Paler than he was it was impossible for Dunster to become, but clammy drops of perspiration started forth from his forehead, and he caught hold of the back of a chair, to prevent himself from falling.

A suspicion, too awful for words, was taking possession of him, and it was strengthened by the remembrance of the promise Theckla had extorted from him the preceding afternoon. Good heavens! Was it only yesterday? It seemed weeks ago instead of hours.

"Are you ready to come now?" asked Pilchard, who had been watching him closely.

"Yes. Lead on," he responded, and mechanically followed the detective as he left the room, and went outside into the passage.

How quiet it seemed, and how cold and wan and grey the dawn was!

The lower rooms were all empty, and after examining them they proceeded to the upper, where, to their extreme astonishment, they found all the doors open.

The first room was empty, so was the second, so were they all, including the apartment Dunster knew to have been Theckla's.

Each chamber bore in it the marks of recent occupation, and signs of having been left in some haste, but there were no papers about—

not a sign by which their former occupants could have been traced.

The detective's face began to look blank as he ascended to the upper story, where the same result attended their search.

"They may be down below—there must be a basement," he muttered, and thither they proceeded, but that, too, was empty, and after he had explored it, Pilchard's expression changed from eager expectation to angry disappointment. "Foiled, by heavens!" he muttered, coming to a standstill. Then he turned to Dunster, in a peremptory manner, "My lord, in the interests of justice, I must demand to know all you can tell me of the man who called himself Marriott."

A moment's thought convinced the Viscount that his only course was to obey the mandate. He therefore, as briefly and succinctly as possible, related all that had happened since he asked for shelter from the storm, only omitting to mention Theckla's name.

"And this is all you know?" said Pilchard, looking at him with piercing intentness.

"That is all—stay!" he continued, with a sudden flash of remembrance, as the memory of what he had seen a few nights since recurred to him. As soon as he mentioned it Pilchard started up with renewed hope.

"We must search the moat!" he exclaimed, "and there, perhaps, we may find some further clue. Marriott must have been warned from Vienna of the capture of his *confère*, and have lost no time in getting out of possible danger. He is a clever man!" added the detective, not without a certain amount of admiration in his voice.

Once more they went over the house to make quite sure there was no one lingering behind, and then Pilchard went out on the terrace, and gave utterance to a long, low whistle, which had the effect of bringing to his side six men, all in plain clothes, and all as unlike the typical detective as it is possible to imagine.

To them Pilchard gave a few words of explanation, and then cords were procured from the house, and Dunster having indicated the precise spot where, to the best of his belief, the box had been deposited, an instant and careful search commenced.

They presented a strange group, working away in the dim greyness of the early morning, and it was impossible not to be impressed by the sense of mystery that seemed to surround them. The old Grange, with its ivy clad walls and dilapidated chimneys formed a fitting background for their work.

In spite of himself, and the control he tried his best to exercise over his emotions, Dunster found himself growing excited, especially as, after some difficulty, the object of their search was discovered, and the task of drawing it up commenced.

This was by no means easy, and if the men had not all been exceptionally strong further assistance would have had to be called. The Viscount himself helped, and at length the box—a long, narrow one—was pulled up, and deposited on the bank.

After this had been effected the men paused a few minutes from their labours, while Pilchard looked more thoughtful than he had done before.

"You are a county magistrate, I presume, my lord?" he said, addressing Dunster.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think we had better lose no time in opening this box, but it is a responsibility I should not have cared to undertake without your authority, which I must ask you to give."

"You have it," responded the young Viscount, his voice not quite so steady as usual.

Hammer and chisel were produced, and the lid was forced back, Dunster standing a little way off during the operation, for in this work he was unable to render help.

Then, as the lid fell back, and the contents were disclosed, a simultaneous exclamation of horror fell from the lips of all those near enough

to see; and Dunster, trembling with a fear too terrible to put into words, pressed forward, only to recoil with a loud cry of indescribable agony.

The box contained the body of a man, of whom the features were still recognisable, and those features belonged to his missing brother—Hubert Thelluson!

CHAPTER V.

I SUPPOSE every year as it passes by brings with it certain mysteries that are never solved, certain dark deeds whose authors are never discovered, certain sensational paragraphs in the newspapers which are read, commented upon, and in time forgotten.

Such an one was the death of Hubert Thelluson; for two years passed away, and at the end of them Ernest Dunster was as completely in the dark as to the details of the crime as he had been when he first looked on the pale features of the dead man.

Of course an inquest had been held, and the result was a verdict to the effect that Thelluson had died from a wound in the chest, which, it was surmised, must have been inflicted by a sword, but of this there was of course no evidence.

Dunster, trying his best to crush out his love for the daughter of his brother's murderer—for in this light he regarded Marriott—redoubled his efforts, and left nothing that could be done undone in his endeavour to trace him. Moreover, in this he was aided by Government, for there could be no doubt that the man was a thorough-paced scoundrel, who had got into society by some occult method, and then contrived to cheat it by means of a handsome exterior and unlimited money.

However, be that as it may, after his disappearance from the Grange he seemed to vanish as completely as if he had never existed. Detectives were employed, the police in every town in Europe were communicated with, and neither money nor effort was spared to trace him out; but all in vain, and as time went on it seemed more and more improbable that he would ever be found.

Of Dunster's state of mind after that miserable night it is hardly necessary to speak, since with such strong confirmatory evidence it could hardly be doubted that Theckla had known all along of his brother's terrible fate, and had kept her father informed of his own movements with regard to the inquiries he was making, so that he could fly at the least symptom of danger.

And Ernest had loved her so well, believed in her so entirely! Yes, even after her flight, he would sometimes recall the expression in her eyes as she had told him she loved him and start up, exclaiming,—

"I will not believe her false! Sinned against she may be; the daughter of a villain she is; but for all that, pure and innocent herself!"

For many months he clung to the hope that she might send him a line to assure him of her faith even if she did not let him know where she was; but in course of time this hope died a natural death, and finally the belief in her possible innocence also died—as it could hardly fail to do under such circumstances.

But if that vanished the hope of vengeance did not—nay, it even strengthened, until the desire to stand face to face with his enemy and charge him with the foulest crime a man can commit grew so overwhelming that it dominated every other thought and made life one long, fierce thirst.

Such mercy as Marriott had meted out to Hubert Thelluson should be meted out to him by the dead man's brother, and woe to those who should attempt to stand between them!

Naturally Dunster often wondered in what manner his brother and the Marriotts became

acquainted, and what had been the motive of the murder; but it seemed probable that no satisfactory answer would ever be returned to either of these queries.

People said it was a pity he did not make up his mind to let the matter rest, and return to his deserted home; but those who knew him best prophesied that he would never do this, while others feared his trouble would grow into a mania, and much brooding over it would turn his brain.

This latter fear seemed by no means improbable, for towards the close of the second year after the discovery of the body, the constant anxiety preyed so much on his mind that his physical health suddenly failed, and he found himself quite unable to continue the search that was now the mission of his life. Doctors all told him he must have rest—that it had become a positive necessity; and so at last he yielded to their persuasions, and went to a little quiet seaside place in Wales, where tourists have not yet penetrated, and the manners and customs are as primitive as if a spell of immutability had kept it unchanged during the last two or three centuries.

He took lodgings in a small farm-house some distance from the village, and spent most of his time in long, lonely rambles across the mountains, where he was not likely to meet anyone save the shepherd, and the only sound to break the silence was the ringing of the sheep-bell or the song of the lark.

In one of these rambles he came across a small, but rather pretty, cottage, almost hidden amongst the trees on a small plateau of rock. There was nothing particular in it to attract attention, except that it was the only habitation for miles round, and it was due to an accident rather than design that Dunster spoke of it to his landlady, and asked her who lived there.

She was very communicative, and quite willing to give every particular she knew.

A lady and her husband had come there some time ago: the latter was an invalid, and had died soon after his arrival. But the lady stayed on, and turned the cottage into a hospital for sick children.

She was very good (the lady); everybody in the village liked her, and she nursed the children all by herself, and devoted herself to them in a way that astonished their parents, while the children themselves were never tired of singing her praises.

Her name was Lisle—Mrs. Lisle—but she was quite young, and nobody knew anything else about her.

Dunster asked no more questions, simply because his curiosity was exhausted; but about a week after, as he was passing the cottage again, he happened to catch sight of a slim, black-robed figure in the garden.

The glimpse was but momentary, for the lady disappeared in the house almost directly. Nevertheless, he was haunted by some vague sense of familiarity in the outlines—some idea of having seen them before, although he could not recall when or where.

He was puzzled, and perhaps for this reason passed the cottage the next morning, and the next, but was not rewarded by a sight of his inmate.

One evening, however, as he was returning home, and had just got beyond the gate, he came to a full stop; for there before him stood the woman whose face had haunted him—sleeping or waking—for the last two years—the woman he loved, and who had betrayed him!

"Theckla!" he cried out, involuntarily, and at the sound of his voice she stood still, while the yellow sunset lighted up her face, and enveloped her in a glory, like the aureole round the head of a pictured saint.

She clasped her two hands together, and just for a moment reeled unsteadily forward, as if the surprise had been too much for her, and she were about to faint. But after all she did nothing of the sort, for one glance into Dunster's eyes seemed to have a strange sort

of calming effect on her, and gave her back her self-possession.

"Theckla!" he said again.

"Yes," she replied, "it is I, but I am almost surprised that you should recognise me. Am I not much altered?"

It was true. All the girlishness had vanished from her face, and it was a beautiful, saddened woman, instead of a brilliant society belle, who now gazed at Dunster.

Many times had he rehearsed what he would say to her if ever they met—many times had he formulated sentences of bitter withering satire and angry denunciation; but now that they were really face to face all these faded from his mind, and he was only conscious of the madness of a passion he had not yet mastered—the wild beating of a heart that had hungered and thirsted for the mere sound of her voice.

He was silent for some minutes, letting her question remain unanswered then he said,—

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Alone?" his voice trembled now.

"Yes," again.

"Where is—your father?"

"Dead!" she returned, simply, casting at the same time a glance downwards at her black dress.

"Dead!" repeated Dunster, and his first feeling was one of wild rage and angry disappointment. "Then he has escaped me after all!"

She turned upon him her sad, grave eyes. "Why should you hate him? He did you no wrong—except indeed," she added in a low voice, "the unconscious wrong that every wicked man does a good one."

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, "Surely there is no necessity for you to feign ignorance now? You must be aware that I found my brother's dead body the very night of your flight?"

Her face changed—a shudder shook her frame.

"Will you come inside?" she said, after a slight pause, "and then I will explain to you all it is possible for me to tell. I have been weighing these two things—whether I should respect the wishes of the dead at the expense of suffering you to believe that I am the daughter of a murderer, or whether I should not be fulfilling a higher duty in telling you the truth."

He followed her inside the gate, through a little grove of trees, and then across a lawn into a small sitting-room, very sparsely furnished, but neat and clean, and scented with the fragrance of mignonette and jasmine.

Here he seated himself opposite her as she stood at the window, with the westering light falling on her face.

How he longed to take her in his arms and hold her to his breast. But there was a gulf between them, which, he told himself, could never be bridged over.

"When you found your brother's body you came to the conclusion that he had been murdered by my father?" she began, looking at him steadily while she spoke.

"Yes. What other conclusion was it possible for me to arrive at?"

"I do not know, but you were wrong. My father was a bad man—yes!" she said, with a deep sigh and a tighter compression of her clasped hands. "He was cruel and treacherous, and bent upon nothing but making as much money as he could, and preying on his fellow-creatures. Still there was no blood upon his soul. Do you know anything of his history before you met him?" she asked.

"I know that he went under different aliases, and 'Pullen' was one of them. I know that he was a coiner by profession—a burglar sometimes, perhaps, or at all events, a receiver of stolen goods, and at one time a member of a political society, whose aims were sedition and conspiracy."

She bowed her head, and a burning flush of shame overspread her cheeks.

"You speak bitterly, but the bitterness is

deserved," she said, in a low tone. "Still, I knew nothing of this until after I came to the Grange. I was at school in Italy until I was nearly twenty, and then I went to Vienna to live with my father, who I believed to be a politician, exiled because he was of socialistic tendencies. We lived very quietly and never went out, but a good many men used to assemble at our house in the evening, and talk politics—make plans, too, I believe, although I was never admitted into their secrets. Most of the men who came were foreigners, but there were one or two Englishmen, and amongst them your brother. He knew nothing whatever of my father's real character, but simply regarded him as a political agitator—conspirator if you will, and almost entirely agreed with his theories. Some great plan was in progress amongst them, which was to effect a revolution in one of the Eastern States, and regarding which the utmost caution was necessary. Well, one night your brother came, and by accident he met a man he knew—a man whom he declared to be one of the outcasts of society, and whom he declared was unfit to be the associate of honourable men. He grew very excited, and in an excess of rage this man sprang upon him, and inflicted a deep wound in his side with a dagger while Mr. Thelluson fired a revolver, which it seems he usually carried. The effect of the shot was fatal, and the man fell dead instantaneously."

She paused a moment, shuddering, and closed her eyes.

"I knew nothing of this for a long time after," she resumed. "But the next night we left Vienna in two parties, and came to England, bringing with us Mr. Thelluson, who was disguised in female attire so that he should escape detection. It was he who suggested the old Grange as a place where there would be small risk of discovery, for he said you were away from England, and there were no other near neighbours to spy upon us."

"Why—oh! why did he not communicate with me?" groaned Dunster, upon whom a new light was bursting. "He might have trusted my love."

"Yes, but don't you see, it was of that very love he was afraid!" she exclaimed, earnestly. "He could not bear the shame of your knowing he was a murderer, and it was his desire you should believe him dead, and his intention to go to America and begin a new life there directly his wound was well enough to allow him to travel so far. Bad as my father was he had some good qualities, and one of these was his determination never to desert a comrade. Besides, he really liked Mr. Thelluson, and he certainly did all he could to conceal him from justice, although he afterwards took advantage of being at the Grange to resume his old trade of coining." The girl shivered again, as if at the remembrance of some terrible reminiscence. "Before we had been at the Grange long my father became possessed of a large sum of money, and then he suddenly resolved to go to London for the season, his intention being to marry me to a rich man, and so provide himself with a wealthy daughter in case his various schemes fell to the ground. Do you wonder I can speak in this cold-blooded manner of these things?" she demanded. "Ah! but you must remember I have served a long apprenticeship to a terrible fate, and sometimes it seems to me I have grown callous, and my heart has turned to stone. Well, to cut the matter short, my father managed to get introduced to London society through a nobleman whom he knew, but who was unaware of his real character. Then commenced a wretched time for me. He tried his best to get me to accept the Duke of Restford as a husband; and at last, in order to force me, told me what I had never known before, namely, that his life was a constant defiance of the laws of society and justice, and that, in effect, he was a forger who might at any moment be called upon to answer for his crimes." She covered her face with her hands

and drew a long, sobbing sigh. Even now the recollection stung her to the quick. "I will pass over that awful time; it finally resulted in our suddenly leaving London, for I absolutely refused to accept the Duke, or to go into society again under false pretences, and so we went to the Grange again."

"But," said Dunster, "do you mean to say my brother had been there all this time?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Oh, no! He had a man there to nurse him—one of my father's confidants."

"And did you know full particulars about him when I met you first?"

"No, I knew his name, but I was kept in the dark concerning all else. Of course I suspected a mystery, and a terrible one. It was for that reason I tried to avoid you when I discovered your relationship," she added, looking down. "On our return, we found Mr. Thelluson much worse than he had been; and my father, who was himself a skilful surgeon, declared there was not much hope of his recovery. I helped to nurse him, and implored him to let you know of his condition, but he refused, saying you believed him dead already, and he would not deceive you."

"But," asked Dunster, "what had become of the body of the man who was killed?"

"I believe it was thrown into a pit in the cellars of the Vienna house," she replied, with a shiver of disgust. "But there was no inquiry made in Austria concerning his death, because he was an American, of erratic habits, whose friends were not alarmed at his disappearance. Well, knowing that your efforts to discover your brother could only result in the knowledge of his guilt, I did my best to dissuade you to give them up, and afterwards"—a wave of crimson overspread her cheeks—"the thought of your knowing my connection with the tragedy made me a coward, and I resolved to go away, and leave my father, and never see you again."

"But," he said gently, "you confessed your love for me?"

"I know, but the confession was involuntary, for I knew nothing could come of it. It was impossible for you to link your name with mine, so I only waited to finish some pictures I had been painting before setting forth to try and earn my living by the sale of them, and others that I intended painting. Then Mr. Thelluson died, and my father told me he intended burying him in the churchyard, as he had desired, but they had not enough men just then to carry the coffin so far, so they put it in the garden, until another man who had gone to Vienna came back. However, he did not come back at all, for he was arrested on going to our former house for the purpose of getting back some papers which had been left there, and which gave important information concerning the movements of the party to which my father belonged. He received a telegram from a friend in Vienna, telling him of what had happened, and of course it behoved him to leave the Grange instantly, and seek a fresh asylum. It was on that night you came; and I, learning your presence in the house, was afraid harm might come to you, for it would not have suited my father's plans for you to witness his departure, as he was carrying away a good deal of counterfeit coin with him."

"It was for this reason, I sent you the note. Of course I was taken at a disadvantage, for when I declared my intention of not going away with the rest, my father used force. He did not hurt me," she interpolated, with a gentle smile, as Dunster started up with an angry exclamation, "but he made me accompany him, and I had no chance of escape. We went to London first, and then my father saw the advertisement of this cottage in the *Times*, and determined to take it; as it was so quiet and secluded that it was not likely to attract attention. Well, on our way down here he got very wet, and caught a severe cold, which turned to rheumatic fever. I nursed him through it, but he was never the

same man afterwards, and at last he succumbed to intense weakness, and died."

Her voice had fallen into a whisper as she uttered the last words, and a few tears splashed on her folded hands.

"And since that time, Theckla?" said the Viscount, interrogatively.

"Since that time I have supported myself by selling my paintings," she continued, "I have been very fortunate in disposing of them, and had made up my mind to stay here all my life. It is quiet, and I am at peace."

"But why did you not write to me?" he asked.

Her lips quivered, but she did not answer. "I have already heard of your tenderness and devotion to the village children," he added,

"and I acknowledge the beauty of the life of self-renunciation you have been leading. But, Theckla, you have other duties—duties that will call you away from here." He came over to her, and put a hand on each of her shoulders, bending down the while to look into her face.

"I tried hard to forget you!" he said. "I told myself you were unworthy, and had deceived me; but through it all I think my heart was true to you. I know that the sight of you brought back all the old love. Come to me, Theckla, and let me care of you in the future!"

She drew back, holding out her hands with an imploring gesture.

"No!—no! How can I?—the daughter of a man who is hated and scorned wherever he is known! How can I become the wife of any honourable man?"

"Your father's sin is not yours! Whatever he may have been you at least are sweet and pure. Theckla! such love as mine has bridged over a deeper gulf than the one that lies between us two! What care I for name or rank? I only know that you are the one woman in the world for me, and none other shall ever become my wife!"

He spoke with passionate fervour, and he could see that her whole frame was shaken with emotion at his words.

"I cannot!" she said, brokenly. "I should be doing you a wrong to marry you!"

"You would be doing me a greater if you kept away from me, Theckla! I am no boy swayed by impulse, but a man who knows well the value of every word he utters! And I tell you that it is in your power to give me either happiness or misery! Which shall it be?"

And she, looking in his eyes, and seeing that the power he spoke of was indeed hers, let her heart answer.

"Happiness!" she said, as his arms folded round her in an embrace that was all the sweeter because of the bitter past!

[THE END.]

THE MARKS UPON A COW'S HORN.—The marks upon the horns of a cow indicate her age and not, as some misguided persons would have us believe, the number of calves she may have had. As these marks or rings are the same upon the horns of an ox or bull as upon those of a cow it cannot be the calves which cause them. At two years old a wrinkle may be found forming at the base of the horn, and as the horn grows the next year this wrinkle is easily seen. This marks three years growth. At five years a second wrinkle appears. After that one appears every year until at the age of eleven or twelve the wrinkles are smaller and closer and less conspicuous, and some of the earliest will have been worn away. The horns are no guide to the age after thirteen years, nor are the teeth, as the condition of these depend upon the amount of pasturing done—the goodness or the badness of the pasture and the sandy or clayey character of the soil.

FACETIÆ.

It is a remarkable fact that the busy bee, in addition to making honey, cells it.

FARMER: "You say you are ready to do anything?" Jolly Tramp: "In course, anything but work."

MR. SUAVE: "Ah! how do, Mr. Jones, Tommy, this is Mr. Jones; I think you've heard me speak of him?" Tommy: "Oh, yes; that's the man you told mother was just the liveliest old fraud out."

YOUNG WIFE: "Mr. Polisson, I wish some nice smelts for dinner to-day?" Mr. Polisson: "Yes madam. How many?" Young Wife: "One will be plenty, for only last week I ordered two salmon, and there was a great deal too much."

SUTOR: "Sir, you are undoubtedly aware of the object of my visit?" Father: "I believe you desire to make my daughter happy. Do you really mean it?" Sutor: "Unquestionably." Father: "Well, don't marry her then."

HUSBAND: "You have been riding my pockets again." Wife: "Well, I only found five shillings." Husband: "Give it back to me. I am going to bestow it on a poor deserving widow." Wife: "No, I thank you! Charity begins at home."

"But why do you persist in refusing to marry me, Helen?" "Because you told me the other evening that your wife must be a woman of good judgment." "And are you not?" "I have always been considered so. That's why I hesitate about breaking my record."

LITTLE boy to larger one, who has begun to whip him without provocation: "What are you poundin' me for? I hain't nothin' to you." "Hain't, eh? You belong to the same school I do, don't you? Well, the school-teacher licked me yesterday, and I'm going to boycott this school, I am."

SHE HAD HIM.—Old Mr. Sparques was somewhat irritable when he came down to the breakfast-table, and when his wife reproved him for wearing such a gloomy aspect he answered her snappishly, and they had some words, after which she said: "Well, I'm sure I don't know how you expect we'll agree in the next world if we can't agree in this." "Oh, we'll agree well enough in the next world!" said old Mr. Sparques, sarcastically. "We won't see much of each other there. The Scriptures say there's a great gulf fixed between the two places." Having fired this shot, the old gentleman caressed his bald head, and snickered. Mrs. Sparques was thoughtful for a moment; then, with a twinkle of her eye, she said: "This is the first time I ever knew that you had given up all hopes of going to heaven." Mr. Sparques went out in the garden to take a look at the weather.

THE LATEST CAT STORY.—Pussy sat on the kitchen window sill, with her eyes half shut, and purred and purred. She looked very sleepy indeed; but she was more aly than sleepy. She was an Angora cat, and very handsome. She had long, silky white fur and fringed ears and a bushy tail like a squirrel. She often curled it over her back, just as a squirrel would. Pussy was in the kitchen a great deal, and she saw the cook make custards, puddings and cake. She wanted some, meant to have some. She noticed that whenever a certain bell was rung the cook left the kitchen and stayed out for several minutes. The bell-cord was within her reach if she stood up on her hind feet. It was not where the cook would see it. Pussy alyly pulled the cord with her forepaws and rang the bell. The cook went out to see what was wanted, and pussy devoured a custard in great haste. When the cook came back she lay in a corner and seemed fast asleep. She played this trick over and over again. But after awhile someone hid and watched while the cook was out, and saw pussy ring the bell.

SOCIETY.

HER Majesty and the Court have been leading a quiet life at Balmoral, where they were visited by the Prince and Princess of Wales before returning South.

The King of Portugal while here went about a good deal. He lunched with the Lord Mayor, has visited the Zoo and the Lyceum. His Majesty warmly complimented Mr. Irving, who is understood to have expressed a hope that they would become better acquainted by-and-by.

AMONG the visitors to Cromer this season have been the Princess Louise and her husband, who have been constantly together, affording a picture of domestic felicity hugely appreciated by the visitors to the same resort. Both the Princess and the Marquis are in good health.

THE Crown Prince of Germany, who has been complaining of debility for some time past, has been advised to spend the winter under the Southern sun, and arrangements are accordingly being made for him to take up his abode in Italy. The Crown Princess furthers the plan with heartiness, as Italian scenery and life have unfailing attractions for her.

THE Duke of Edinburgh has been to Constantinople to see the Sultan, who has had a luxurious residence prepared for him. A good many rumours have been afloat as to the political significance of the visit, but they have no foundation.

It seems Prince Alexander in his youth was a special favourite of the late Princess Alice, and is often mentioned in her correspondence with his Royal mother, which explains the Queen's interest in this Prince, totally irrespective of the "Bulgarian Question."

H.R.H. the Princess Louise, Marchioness of Lorne, has been pleased to accept a copy of Miss Eleanor Rowe's "Hints on Wood Carving."

MINISTERS are off to the four winds of heaven to enjoy their well-earned holidays. The Marquis of Salisbury is gone to Royat, Lord Randolph Churchill for a tour on the Continent, Mr. W. H. Smith and family to Munich, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach to Ireland—not much of a rest for him!—Lord Cranbrook to Hemsted-park, Staplehurst, Kent, and the Hon. E. Stanhope, the Colonial Secretary, to his country seat, Revesby Abbey, Boston, Lincolnshire.

THE Costume Ball given by Mayor Young in the Sydney Exhibition Buildings in honour of the Queen's Jubilee is reported to have been a great success. The host had set himself to break the Sydney record in the way of social gorgeousness, and he did it. A colonial contemporary says that of Mr. Young's generosity there could be no doubt. Everything that gold could obtain was procured for the delectation of the guests, and as many as the building would hold were there. If any did not enjoy themselves, it was not for lack of sight which the host or gathering could supply.

THERE was a stylish wedding at St. Mary's Church, Welshpool, the other day, when the Rev. John Sawyer, vicar of Leighton, near Welshpool, led to the altar Miss Harriette Sarah Harrison, eldest daughter of the late Mr. Harrison, of Welshpool.

The bride wore a beautiful dress, consisting of a petticoat of cream plush, over which were a bodice and train of cream satin, and a lace veil fastened with pearl ornaments, over a wreath of orange blossom.

The bride was accompanied by four bridesmaids, whose costumes were of cream-coloured embroidered silk, with cream lace bonnets, trimmed with cornflowers.

Each bridesmaid wore a gold bracelet, the gift of the bridegroom, who also presented the bride with a bracelet and a beautiful bouquet of white exotics and other flowers. The bridesmaids' bouquets were of poppies and cornflowers.

STATISTICS.

AGRARIAN OUTRAGES IN IRELAND.—A Parliamentary return shows that in the quarter ended June last there were 297 agrarian offences reported to the constabulary in Ireland. There was one murder in Kerry, one case of manslaughter in Galway, eight cases of firing at the person, five being in Kerry, one case of attempted murder in Kerry, 24 incendiary fires, eight being in Kerry, six cases of robbery, 17 cases of maiming and killing cattle, four being in Kerry. 118 cases of threatening letters, 28 being in Kerry and 28 in Clare, 33 cases of intimidation by other means, twelve being in Kerry, and 45 cases of injury to property, nine being in Kerry.

IRISH TAXATION.—According to a Parliamentary return recently issued, the total amount raised by taxation in Ireland in the year 1801 was £2,678,751. With some fluctuations, the amount increased in 1850 to £4,020,886. In the financial year ending March 31, 1881, the amount was £7,115,594. The same return shows that the total amount of loans and advances from the Imperial Exchequer since 1800 stood on the 31st of March last at £53,318,579. Of this sum, £27,177,015 had been repaid at that date, and £10,282,803 had been remitted, leaving an outstanding balance of £15,858,761.

GEMS.

TWO does he foolishly, who for fear of anything in this world, ventures to displease God, for in so doing he runs away from men and falls into the hands of the living God.

THE man who is suspicious lives in a constant state of unhappiness. It would be better for his peace of mind to be too trustful than too guarded.

TO love the public, to study universal good, and to promote the interest of the whole world, as far as lies within our power, is the height of goodness, and makes the temper which we call divine.

IF you would make the most of life, forget yourself in some interest outside yourself; do not drift, but steer; do with your might what your hands find to do; and trust in God and your own soul.

REMORSE of conscience is like an old wound; a man is under no condition to fight under such circumstances. The pain abates his vigour, and takes up too much of his attention.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

THE *Scientific American* states that plush goods, and all articles dyed with aniline colours, faded from exposure to the light, will look as bright as ever after being sponged with chloroform. The commercial chloroform will answer the purpose very well, and is less expensive than the purified.

FROZEN PEACHES.—For eight persons use one pint of sugar, one of boiling water, and two quarts of ripe peaches, pared and sliced. Put the water, sugar and half-a-dozen cracked peach-stones in a stew-pan and boil for a quarter of an hour; then rub the peaches through a puree-sieve, and strain the hot syrup on them. Stir well, and then cool. When cold freeze.

SWEET-APPLE PUDDING.—One pint of scalded milk, half a pint of Indian meal, one tablespoonful of salt, six sweet apples cut in small pieces, one tablespoonful of finely-chopped suet, two great teaspoonfuls of treacle, half a teaspoonful of ginger, nutmeg or cinnamon—whichever is most desirable—two eggs well beaten, and half a teaspoonful of carbonate soda. Beat well together, put into a pudding mould, and boil two hours.

MISCELLANEOUS.

SNEEZING AND SHIVERING.—Nature's provision against the consequences of a "chill," and for the prevention of a "cold," are sneezing and shivering. A violent fit of sneezing often saves a chilled body the consequences of the nerve depression or "shock" to which it has been subjected, and this shock may in its first impression be very limited in its area; for example, the small extent covered by a draught of cold air rushing through the crevice of a door or window. The nerve centres are roused from their "collapse" by the commotion or explosive influence of the sneeze. If sneezing fails, nature will try a shiver, which acts mechanically in this way. If she fails, the effects are likely to be very serious and bad consequences may ensue. The cold is slight when sneezing suffices to recover the nervous system quickly from its depression, and grave when even strong shivering fails to do so.

USED IN PERFUMERY.—A few terms used in perfumery are so confusing that a word or two of explanation is necessary. "Extract," "essence," "spirits" and "tincture" are practically the same, viz.: an alcoholic solution of a pleasant odour. A "tincture," strictly speaking, is an extract prepared by treating dry substances, such as musk, orris, etc., with alcohol; but in perfumery, at least, the distinction is not necessary. If the term "extract" alone were used to represent all these, there would be a great gain in simplicity without any loss through ambiguity. Some manufacturers, too, make a distinction between "essence of rose" (prepared from pomade) and "spirit of rose" (prepared from otto). A better way to distinguish them is to name the former "extract of rose pomade," and the latter "extract of rose." A pomade is a fat or oil holding certain odours in solution. The more delicate odours are best collected in this way, and cannot satisfactorily be collected in any other. The term "otto" is usually restricted to oil of roses, but it might with advantage be extended to all the essential oils. These oils are generally obtained by distilling the odoriferous substances with water. The oil distils over with the water and then readily separates from it. Simple essences contain only one odour dissolved in alcohol; "bouquets," or handkerchief perfumes, are mixtures of two or more simple essences.

A ROMANCE FROM COREA.—For parents and near kinsfolk it is customary in Corea to mourn three years. What a deep influence this prescriptive usage has upon the life of the people is illustrated by the following story of an aged bachelor who was asked why he had never taken a wife. "My parents as well as myself," he said, "were desirous that I should marry, and a suitable young lady being found our betrothal took place. Then my future father-in-law died, and we had of course to wait three years. I had hardly put off my mourning than I had to bewail the loss of my own poor father. Necessarily here was another term of three years' waiting. When these were up, the mother of my future wife took ill and expired, and thus we were obliged to delay our marriage another three years. Lastly, I had the misfortune to lose my own dear mother, which naturally caused a further adjournment. So that, as four times three makes twelve, that number of years passed over our heads and made us both the older. At this time my betrothed fell ill, and as she was at death's door, I went to pay her a last visit. My future brother-in-law met me at the door, and said, 'Although you are not formally married, yet perhaps I may for this once look upon you as man and wife. Come in and see her.' I had hardly entered and been for a moment face to face with my promised wife than she breathed her last. When I saw this all thoughts of marriage fled from me, and I have remained a bachelor ever since."

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

GIPSY.—The 18th December, 1885, fell on a Monday.

S. W.—You neglected to enclose the hair referred to.

LIZZIE.—Consult some professor of music on the subject.

D. O. B.—The letters are well formed, but rather disconnected. If less studied, your handwriting would be generally regarded as remarkably good.

YOUNG HOUSEKEEPER.—1. The desired effect may be obtained by mixing a little tallow with the starch. 2. February 23rd, 1886, came on a Friday. Very good calligraphy.

DORA.—The quotation is from Job, chapter xxviii, verse 18, and reads as follows: "No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls; for the price of wisdom is above rubies."

LETTA.—The correct quotation is the following:—"For the poor always ye have with you; but me (Jesus) ye have not always." See St. John, chapter xii, verse 8.

THOUGHTFUL.—If you will let us know what part of London you wish to be married in we will give you the address of the registrar. The fee is small, and one of the parties must have resided in the district fourteen days previous to the marriage.

LUNA DEWEET is not too old, but we would certainly advise her to think long and seriously before attempting a theatrical career. The prizes are few and far between, and the blanks thick as autumn leaves. We cannot give addresses.

ROSE.—The young man is evidently that abomination, a general lover or male flirt. The same vows and protestations he has addressed to you he has made to others without number, and to believe in him, unless you see some very valid signs of alteration, would be an act of supreme folly; in short, nothing less than suicidal to your own chance of future happiness in life.

AMY.—A fine tooth-wash is made as follows: Take of pulverised orris root, one ounce; tongue beans, one ounce; Peruvian bark, half an ounce; oak bark, half an ounce; alcohol, one pint; water, one pint; let stand for twelve days, and filter; colour, if desired, with alkali-net root. A simpler tooth-wash is thus made: Tincture of orris, essence of rose, and alcohol, each half a pint; oil of almonds, five drops. Mix.

E. S. O.—He must be ruled by the opinion of his stomach. Nature is our trust guide. What is the right diet for one man may be unfit for another. No diet can be marked out by clever theorists which will apply in every case. The stomach must render the verdict, and it is right, and theory wrong. Egyptians have decided that a patient's whims and caprices about eating should be regarded and not opposed, as formerly. Sometimes the most strictly tabooed and seemingly indigestible article, such as pickles, ham, bacon, or cheese, is strongly craved by the sick or convalescing patients. The doctors now say: "Let them have it."

OLIVERA.—Alexander the Great was the first Greek who brought the services of the barber in regulation. He ordered the Macedonians to be shaved because their long beards afforded a ready handle to the enemy in battle. A man's foe could catch him by his long hairs appendage and plunge a poniard into him as Job treated Amasa. Alexander the Great and Julius Cæsar kept their special barber and shaved every week. Scipio Africanus was the first to introduce the cleanly modern fashion of shaving every day. Peter the Great was a believer in barbers. His first act, when he began to civilise his people, was to cut off their beards. The parti-coloured barber's pole is a reminiscent symbol of the earlier time when the barber had other functions besides hair-cutting and shaving. They then extracted teeth, dressed wounds, and bled sick people. Bleeding was considered the most important agent in curing disease. The pole of the barber's sign represents the rod which was always put in the hand of the patient when he was bled; the red colour symbolises the blood, and the white stripe is the fillet which was bound around the arm above the vein to be pierced. Henry VIII. took away the surgeon and dentist office from the barbers by special edict.

F. F. B.—If we had a suitor we did not care to have dangle about us, we would be coolly polite to him first; if he failed to take the hint, we would tell him candidly that special attentions from him were not agreeable. Unless a man is a fool or is fathom deep in love, he will not fail to see by a lady's manner when his company is not desirable. But the trouble is that some girls play hot and cold in such a contradictory way as to keep a suitor on the see-saw. The colours of the two locks of hair inclosed are black and brown. Both are soft and glossy. We can't say which is the prettier. They no doubt respectively set off both eyes and complexions. Brown eyes are said to indicate an affectionate, home-loving disposition; gray eyes are intellectual; yellow-brown eyes are called "flirty;" greenish-gray eyes are said to accompany a subtle but selfish nature. There is no infallibility in such sayings. An old poem decides the matter thus:

"Black eyes most dandle in a hall,
Blue eyes most please at evening fall;
The black a conquest soonest gain,
The blue a conquest most retain.
But let each reign without control,
The black all mind, the blue all soul."

Another rhyme says:

"Those eyes are loveliest all the while,
That wear for us the sweetest smile."

A. Y. Z.—Niagara Falls is a natural cataract, and stands pre-eminent for the enormous volume of water that is carried over so high a precipice.

A. A. M.—The friend referred to should be met at the station by some member of the family and made its guest during his stay in the place.

T. W.—The speckles of hair inclosed are bright brown and black. Both locks are pretty. Your writing is good—shows a lively, vivacious temperament.

T. M. M.—Styes may be cured by dipping a feather in the white of an egg and passing it along the edge of the eyelid. The application of ice to the eyelid will sometimes dissipate them before they come to a head.

E. O. B.—It is the privilege of the lady, after an introduction, to decide whether she will recognize by a bow the gentleman, and if she do so it is an acknowledgment on her part that the introduction was not disagreeable to her.

E. M. C.—Gallodion is gun-cotton dissolved in ether. It is applied with a camel-hair brush to cuts, burns, wounds, leech-bites, &c., over which it forms a thin pellicle or skin, protecting the injured parts from the atmosphere.

R. V. F.—To preserve natural flowers, dip them in melted paraffin, withdrawing them quickly. The liquid should be only just hot enough to maintain its fluidity, and the flowers should be dipped one at a time, held by the stalks and moved about for an instant to get rid of air bubbles.

D. T. S.—Louis XVI. was guillotined in January, 1793, and Marie Antoinette in the following October. When Louis was taken to the guillotine he was permitted to ride in a carriage; but the unfortunate queen was drawn from her prison to the place of execution in a common cart, seated on a bare plank, with the executioner sitting by her side, holding the cords with which her hands were already bound.

JESSIE MAY.—The metre of your verses is faulty, but the sentiment is pretty, and we give them a place:—

FORGOTTEN.

Hast thou forgotten me, dearest?
Hast thou forgotten the past?
Did'st thou not promise me, saying
I will be thine to the last?
Hast thou forgotten the spot
Where we stood in the twilight so gray,
Feeling deep pleasure untold,
As I longed with thee ever to stay?

Hast thou forgotten the words
That were softly poured into mine ear,
By thee—who, perchance, hast forgot,
But to me they ever seem near?
And oft as I sit at the twilight
Is casting its shade all around,
I sigh for thy presence to cheer me,
And long for those words to resound.

But no words respond to my sighing,
For, alas! thou art now far away;
And how dost thou know of the anguish
Which I suffer from day to day?
And sometimes I fancy, my dearest,
'Twere better if we had ne'er met;
Yet I confess I still love thee,
And though forgotten, I cannot forget!

ESTELLE.—Nothing clandestine is exactly right, even when the circumstances seem to justify it. Clandestine meetings between lovers often result harmfully though innocently begun. The very consciousness that there is something hidden and secretive in such meetings detracts from frank enjoyment and opens the door to evil. Kellie is quite young to be receiving much company. She can afford to wait awhile. Instead of being "cross and hateful" her mother may be only a little strict through the best of motives. You ask the meaning of the word "chipper." It means lively, neat, cheery.

M. G. H.—His modesty and self-restraint at once give us a high idea of his worth, and we can but believe that the young lady is aware of his merit, and appreciates his motives for silence, while she would willingly listen to his suit. Let him tell his love, not in any cringing Uriah Heep way either, but in manly frank fashion. A young man of good sense and good principle who has saved money at such a slow business as farming need not feel that he is tip-toeing when he speaks to his employer's daughter. Before he is as old as her father he, too, will probably have a farm of his own, and if the girl loves him, she will not object to climbing the hill with him.

ORIANA.—Tight-lacing is undoubtedly injurious. If you had studied anatomy or physiology you would not ask the question. It compresses lungs, liver, and other organs to an extent incompatible with health. Your grandmother probably had a fine constitution. Women of that day took exercise and lived much in the open air. The "fittest" survived the ordeal of tight-lacing and thin soled-boots which the fashion of that time decreed. The rule for the "waist of beauty" is twice the size of the neck. The waist of the Venus de Medici—the highest type of female beauty—measures twenty-seven inches. Some young women with mistaken passion for sylph-like alenderness, seem to make it the height of their ambition to reduce their waists to eighteen inches. Such proportions unfit a woman for performing some of the highest functions of her being. Take a good deal of exercise, walk, ride, and rub yourself well after bathing, and it is probable your waist will become more shapely.

C. E. B.—In starching muslins, gingham, and calico, dissolve and add to every pint of starch a very small piece of alum. This will keep the colours bright.

RUTH.—To improve your starch, put into a good-sized panful about three inches of spermaceti candle. It puts a fine gloss on shirt-fronts.

STUDENT.—Pamfilo de Narvaez, a Spanish explorer, was born in Valladolid about 1480. He perished off the coast of Louisiana, U.S., in 1528. His accounts led to the exploration of New Mexico and California. He went to America apparently as early as 1501. He sailed from Spain for Florida in 1527, landing at Tampa Bay.

O. S.—The dahlia derived its name from the Swedish botanist, Professor Dahl, who first cultivated it. It was first brought from Mexico, but is now common in Europe. The first roots were brought to Europe in 1790 by Humboldt. There are now said to be more than two thousand kinds of dahlias.

SUSIE.—The alpaca is an animal that lives in the mountains of Peru and Chili. It is shaped like a sheep, but is larger, and its colour varies from grayish-white to brown and almost black. Its wool is nearly a foot long, and is soft and silky and strong. It is sent to this country, where it is made into shawls and other kinds of cloth. The thin cloth called alpaca is woven out of alpaca wool, mixed with silk or cotton.

R. S. Y.—Ephemera is the name given to the May-fly, so named from its appearing in the winged state only for a day. May-flies have been found in certain districts of France covering the ground in such enormous numbers as to be collected by cart-loads for fertilising purposes. One species—the white-winged—is sometimes seen in such quantities on the banks of rivers as to whiten the air and the ground like drifting snow.

E. J. B.—To make a crab pie, procure the crabs alive, and put them into boiling water, to which add some salt. Boil the crabs for about twenty minutes, or longer, according to their size. When cold, pick the meat from the claws and body, and chop altogether, mixing it with crumbs of bread, pepper, salt, and a little butter. Put the meat into the crab shells—one shall will generally hold the meat of two crabs—and brown before the fire.

D. D.—We think you are to be commended for passing your leisure hours so profitably. If all young men would avoid smoking and drinking, as you say you do, and devote one evening to home reading, another to a visit to the public library, another to gymnastics, and another to scientific experiments, they would be much better off at the end of the year, mentally, morally, and physically. Persevere in the course you have marked out for yourself, and you will not fail to achieve a bright and useful manhood.

GRACIE.—The poem you allude to was written by Hannah More. It is this:

"Her life as lovely as her face,
Each duty marked with every grace;
Her native sense improved by reading,
Her native sweetness by good breeding.
"A face untaught to feign, a judging eye
That darts severe upon a rising lie;
And strikes a blanch through frontless flattery.
Led by simplicity divine
She pleased, yet never sought to shine;
She gave to chance each unschooled feature,
And left her cause to God and Nature."

LITTLE WORRY.—Your case seems hard, but it might be worse. Your aunt gives you plenty to eat and nice clothes to wear. That she has a cross temper and does not like you is to be regretted, but then we have all crosses to bear. We must all step upon some thorns. The best we can do is to step as lightly as may be and bear the pain as bravely—taking it as a discipline. Try to win your aunt's liking by patience and sweetness, and by being kind to her poor blind daughter. Perhaps some troubles in the past have soured her. Show her some grateful attentions. Don't rebel immediately at her demanding that you give up your lover. Acquiesce for a while, and then talk to her sensibly and tell her how it hurts you to be separated from him. Perhaps she thinks it is not prudent for an impulsive girl (your letter shows you are impulsive) to be a great deal in company with a young man she loves but cannot marry for a long while, as he has no near prospect of supporting her. This is probably the reason she requires you to take your blind cousin with you when you go out with your lover.

THE LONDON READER, Post-free. Three-halfpence Weekly; or Quarterly One Shilling and Eightpence.

ALL BACK NUMBERS, PARTS and VOLUMES are in print and may be had of all booksellers.

NOTICE.—Part 292, Now Ready, price Sixpence, post-free, Eightpence. Also Vol. XLVI., bound in cloth, 4s. 6d.

ALL LETTERS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR OF THE LONDON READER, 334, Strand, W.C.

††† We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

London: Published for the Proprietor, at 334, Strand, by J. R. SPECK; and Printed by WOODFALL and KINGS, Milford Lane, Strand.